



Adachi^{and} Shimamura Short Stories

WRITTEN BY
Hitoma Iruma

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **raemz**
CHARACTER DESIGN BY **Non**

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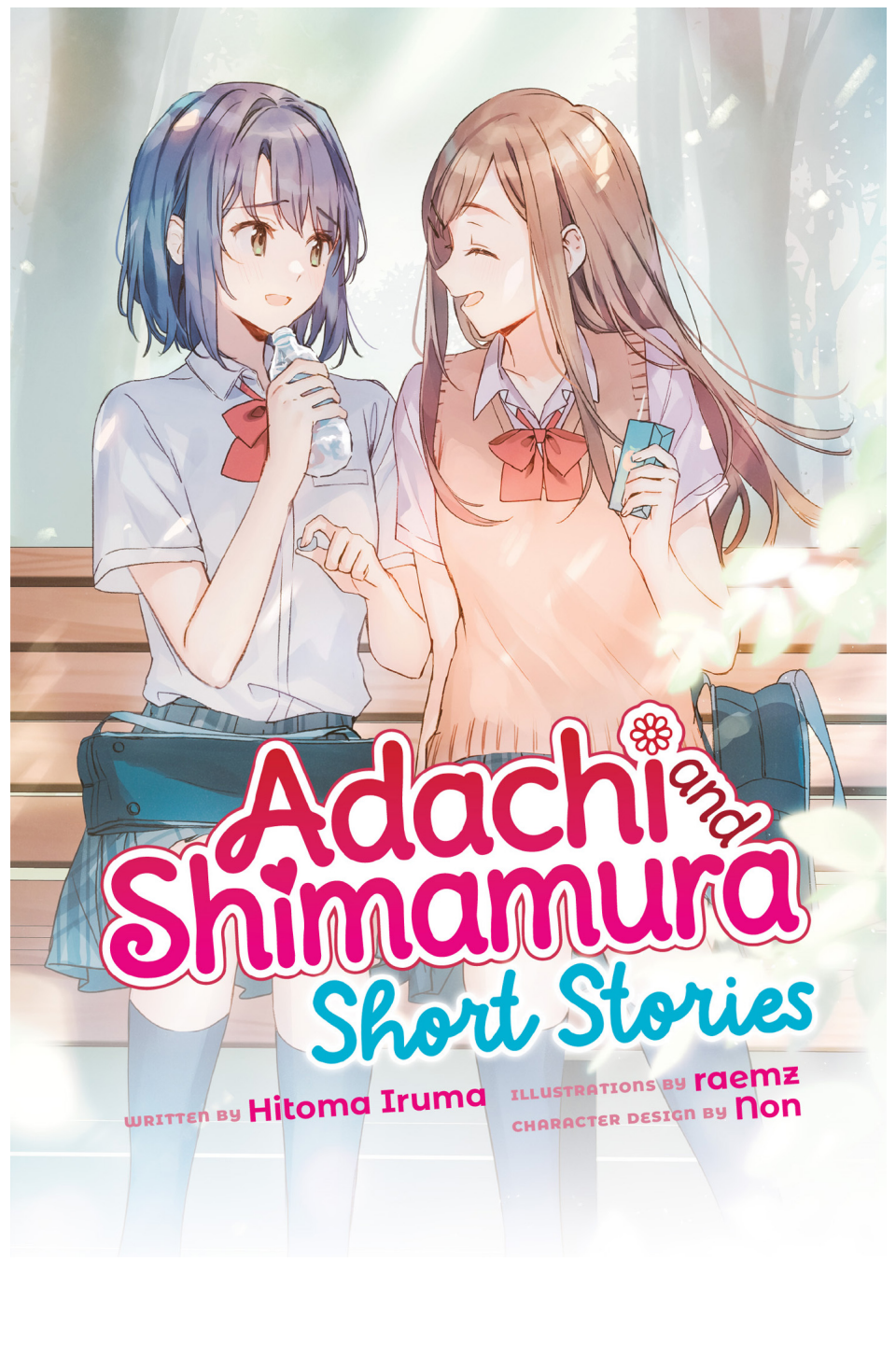
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So, What Does
Adachi Like?

"You must go on a lot of
dates."

"What? Not at all. Nobody
talks to me. I'm 'too quiet'
or whatever."

"Well, I think you're pretty,
however quiet you are."

"Less work for me, then."



Soft and New

"Hashtag date night!
Whooo! Remember,
always ask before you
post pics on social media."

"I...I know that!"

"While we're at it, we may
as well actually take this
photo, huh? Whooo!"

"Da...da...ni...!"

"Ah, yes. Dadani, my
favorite bottled water."



"Welcome home."

"Whoa! Hey, I'm back.
Ooooh!"

She shrank away, tugging the hem of her slit skirt down, as if the attention embarrassed her.

"I thought you *wanted* me to see it."

"Yes, but...no!"

Behold: The Warm
Glow of Christmas

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ADACHI TO SHIMAMURA VOL. SS

© Hitoma Iruma 2023

Edited by Dengeki Bunko

Illustrated by raemz

Character Design by Non

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TRANSLATION: Molly Lee

ADAPTATION: Emlyn Dornemann

LOGO DESIGN: George Panella

COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim

INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner

INTERIOR LAYOUT: Sheenly S.

COPY EDITOR: Meg van Huygen

EDITOR: Rebecca Schneidereit

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Salvador Chan, Jr., April Malig, Jules Valera

MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis

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WRITTEN BY

**Hitoma
Iruma**

ILLUSTRATED BY

raemz



Seven Seas Entertainment



**First Was
the Age of Gold**

One of Countless Beginnings

LONG AFTER THE HEAT of the moment was over, I realized what I'd said to her was true. I agreed to move in with Adachi because it was what *I* wanted. Thus far, I'd felt like a passive observer in the process, watching from a distance as each of my cardboard boxes seemed to disappear of its own accord. But now that the words were out there, I discovered I was the one who'd carried them all along. Even if—as some part of me believed—this was the natural progression of our relationship, it was dawning on me that it was also a choice I'd willingly made.

From that point on, it was like my eyes were finally open. I could clearly envision the future that awaited us. It was so exciting, I couldn't sit still, so I decided to go find Adachi. Even without that objective in mind, I would likely have found my way to her regardless.

That night I skipped down the hallway, giddy like a little kid whose long-awaited vacation was just around the corner. It was an ordinary night in the same ordinary house; physically, nothing around me had changed. But now I could see light—the dawn of a new beginning.

"You appear to be in a good mood, Shimamura-san," Yashiro commented as we passed each other in the hall. She was dressed in her usual post-bath yukata as if entirely unfazed by the winter chill. Someone—probably my sister—had given her a juice box to slurp, and she looked as happy as a pig in mud. Evidently, so did I. Perhaps my recent transformation was so dramatic that even Yashiro's blank, long-sighted marbles perceived it.

"Might even be better than yours."

"I am glad to hear it." *Slurrrp.*

I tousled her hair quickly, and we headed off to our separate destinations—or maybe Yashiro was just wandering aimlessly. That thought made me smile. Motes of light lingered on my palm as I hurried upstairs; moments later, my blue-tinged fingertips grasped the knob and flung open the door to the second-floor study room.

When I came rushing in, I startled Adachi so much that she

practically leapt off the floor...somehow without breaking her kneeling position. As usual, she was graceful and clumsy at the same time, and it was a treat to witness.

“Oh, it’s just you...” she said.

Then, as forcefully as I had entered, I shouted, “I’m all yours!”

She froze, her head slightly tilted, her eyes fixed on the far wall. In the past, that might’ve seemed odd to me. By this point, though, I understood her well enough to intuit that my sudden (and loud) arrival, combined with my choice of greeting, had short-circuited her brain. Pleased with myself, I smirked. As much as I loved learning new things about Adachi, I was deeply satisfied by the puzzles I’d already solved. I suppose you could say there was nothing about her I didn’t like.

Meanwhile, she gave up trying to parse my random silliness and tentatively raised both hands in an attempt to play along. “Um...y-yaaaay...!”

“Hey, girl!” *Hey, hey, heeey.*

So, What Does Adachi Like?

THE FIRST TIME I'd pondered that question was after our conversation in the gym loft petered out. As agonizing silence lingered, my heart scrambled for a foothold, but Adachi and I had nothing in common. The only relief afforded to me was the distant chirping of the cicadas, and even *that* was quieting.

My gaze wandered the short distance to where she sat. The loft was by no means a comfortable place to hang out, yet she'd chosen to come up here, knowing it meant she'd dab sweat away every other minute. Her steely expression gave no clues to whatever her motivations might've been. But though she wasn't very chatty, she replied whenever I spoke to her, so I was reasonably confident that she didn't find me annoying. That was more heartening than the prospect of sitting in silence with someone who hated my guts. If I had irritated her, she wouldn't have come up here to begin with!

Sure, we hadn't planned to meet here, but seeing as it had happened regardless, I wanted to make the most of it. While we weren't obliged to talk, I couldn't think of a reason not to. That said, I'd never normally have gone to such lengths to keep a conversation alive. Maybe my effort was inspired by the unusual circumstances: just the two of us, alone in the gym while everyone else was in class. On some level, it seemed like a great opportunity, and I didn't want it to go to waste.

Perhaps what we needed was a shared interest to get the ball rolling. But, come to think of it, what *were* my interests? Sleeping, for one. Then there were tamagoyaki and okonomiyaki—anything cooked on a griddle, really. Oh, and...dogs. The more I thought about it, the more answers I struck upon, but none were especially relevant.

I could feel the heat melting my inhibitions. Still, I couldn't just start talking about tamagoyaki out of nowhere. Adachi would respond with two or three words at best, and at worst, she'd give me a weird look. Next, I considered asking about makeup or fashion—broadly popular topics among our peers—but she didn't seem like the type to care. She was easily the prettiest girl in our class, but she got a lot of mileage out of her natural good looks.

“You must go on a lot of dates,” I said offhandedly. Our heads tilted in opposite directions as we fanned desperately at our necks.

“What? Not at all.” Her voice bounced off the gym loft walls like a stray ping-pong ball. “Nobody talks to me. I’m ‘too quiet’ or whatever.”

“Well, I think you’re pretty, however quiet you are.”

“Less work for me, then.”

She didn’t seem to have taken my compliment seriously. If I had to guess, I’d say she had no interest in other people’s opinions of her, so she didn’t bother expending the energy to analyze them. Since I understood that outlook all too well, I was starting to think the two of us would get along after all. At the end of the day, we weren’t invested in each other, which was what made it easy.

Wiping a bead of sweat from the tip of my nose, I paused to listen to the cicadas’ caterwauling. Come to think of it, summer was another thing I liked a fair amount. Specifically, I liked that you could always tell when it had begun—not because of some subtle shift in temperature, like the other seasons, but because of the bugs. Once they started their screeching, you could be certain that spring was over. That lack of ambiguity made it easier to let go.

“Do you like summer?” I asked.

“You sure love to change the subject, huh?”

Our conversation was carrying on sporadically, like little bubbles rising to the water’s surface only to pop moments later. You couldn’t call it productive in any regard, but then again, the time we shared in the gym loft never was.

“I’ve never thought about whether I like *any* season. Summer’s... fine, I guess.”

“You don’t mind the heat, I take it?”

“Hmm,” she murmured, and I could practically smell her sweat from where I sat. “On second thought, it sucks.”

“Yeah.”

For once, we were on the same page, and it made me giggle. Adachi didn’t laugh, but I thought the corners of her lips curled. Gazing down absently at our discarded socks, I wriggled my bare toes, as if to shake off the lingering humidity.

Would we still be here once the last vestiges of summer faded away? Now that our paths had crossed, where would we go next? My silent questions fell to the floor like dying cicadas—but neither they nor I had given up the ghost quite yet.

For now, I decided to search for what was clear-cut about this ambiguous connection. After all, I had nothing better to do. That was as good a reason as any, albeit a little backward in its conception. So I would stay right here, in our private sanctuary...at least until summer ended.

Looking back, that was the summer things changed: Adachi's attitude, Adachi's behavior... Well, everything about Adachi, really. After that, it took me a long, long time before I figured out what she was truly interested in.

Drinkable Ice Cream

FOR LACK OF a better adjective, Adachi was always really *melty* around me. That was nice in its own way, like ice cream left out at room temperature. Yet just once, I wanted to see her at her most frigid—the version I heard about from everyone else. My first thought was to secretly tail her so I could observe her demeanor from a distance.

“Hmmm...”

“What?”

Unfortunately, it was impossible even to put any distance between us, since she followed me around like a baby duck. Not that I didn’t enjoy being pursued through the school—I just wasn’t in the mood for soupy ice cream at the moment. Alas, there was no hiding from someone who watched my every move. As long as she knew I was around, she’d stay defrosted.

Abandoning my failed plan, I came to a halt. I’d been so focused on eluding Adachi that I couldn’t tell what floor we’d ended up on. As a crowd of vaguely familiar faces flowed past us, Adachi shot me a confused glance. Honestly, someone should’ve taught her not to tail anybody acting as bizarre as I was.

If I couldn’t physically escape her, what if I asked directly for what I wanted? For example...

“Adachi, could you steer clear of me for a while?” She’d probably cry.

“Could you give me the cold shoulder for a sec?” She’d probably look for an ice pack.

“Could you freeze me out real quick?” I had the feeling she wouldn’t be able to.

Still, I wanted to see if she’d at least try, so I phrased it like this: “Adachi, could you try acting cold toward me?”

“Cold?” she repeated.

“Ice-cold, if possible.” Bracing myself for her most biting words, I spread my arms wide in invitation.

For some reason, she recoiled. “But...how?”

I wasn’t entirely sure what she meant by the question. “Uh...” Come to think of it, how could I give an example when I’d never seen her alleged ice-queen routine firsthand? Did she roll her eyes at everyone?

Before I knew it, we were at an impasse.

“Okay, here’s what we’ll do,” I suggested. “First, I’ll invite you to hang out after school today.”

“Sure, I’m down.”

“No—you’re supposed to refuse.”

“How come?” She looked at me in wide-eyed confusion.

I admittedly couldn’t fault her for that. “Because I’d like you to act cold.”

“I don’t want to, though.” That response, too, was reasonable. Of course she wouldn’t want to. As for me, I’d probably shrug off the rejection and go home.

“Yeah, I know.”

“Okay...?”

We both floundered for a moment.

Now what? Eh, screw it. “Want to hang out?”

“Um...yay...”

And so I gave up. After all, I was perfectly content with my melty ice cream. Why would I want it any other way?

Yum, yum.

Rattle My Memories

I RETURNED TO MY ROOM to find a deer shaking a pair of maracas.

“Well, this is surreal.”

Without missing a beat, Yashiro turned to face me. “Oh, hello, Shimamura-san.”

“You look like you’re having fun in here.”

“Mama-san gave me these and told me to go play, so here I am. Playing.”

“I see.” The maracas *did* look vaguely familiar. “Are you having a good time?”

“I would say so.”

Glad to hear it.

The maracas were blue plastic, like children’s toys. I lifted her into the air to get a better look at them.



“Aha!”

Then it hit me: they were the same ones that had belonged to my grandparents. I remembered that, as a kid, I’d brought them home in the car because I liked them so much. After all, when I shook them, everyone around me seemed to have the time of their lives.

“Ngh...”

Sometimes, when I finally got in bed after an exhausting day, I almost felt the blood drain from my body. A similar sensation washed over me now, as if my head had been left bobbing on waves.

“Gah!”

“What’s the matter?”

“Huh? Oh...nothing. I’m just... I don’t know.”

I lowered the deer back to the ground, then retreated to the window, where I sat hunched over like I was doing an impression of Adachi. After a moment, the rattling sound of maracas approached from behind. Then a soft fabric antler poked my bicep.

“Everyone has those moments,” Yashiro said.

“Like *you’d* know.”

She gave me a patronizing pat on the shoulder, and I kind of... well...let my mind drift. Sometimes, inexplicably, my happiest memories were laced with pain—as if an excess of fun spread to all my heart’s rustiest, dustiest corners. Sniffing, I collected myself and looked over at the deer with her maracas. She was shaking them like they were going out of style. At close range, it was obnoxiously loud.

“Don’t tell anyone, okay?” I cautioned her, just in case.

“About what part?”

“Never mind.”

“Hee hee hee! Fret not. My lips are zipped.”

“Oh *really*?”

To test that claim, I gave her cheeks a little pinch—and smiled despite myself. They were so soft, it seemed I’d have to resign myself to my fate.

Probably After Like 350 Pages

I KNEW THE WEEKEND was supposed to be for rest, but sometimes I wondered if I should do something more. Was everyone else my age in a stew of lethargy and teen angst, letting those feelings boil until they inevitably overflowed? Hino and Nagafuji obviously were, and I didn't have any other benchmark.

For lack of anything better to do, that Sunday found me lying on the floor on my stomach. Yashiro and my sister lay on my back, creating a three-girl pile. To make matters worse, I was stuck; I could hear Yashiro snoring. When I felt my sister's breaths turn slow and steady, I knew my turn would come next. I didn't mind the feeling of their weight on my back, so although our floor wasn't the most comfortable surface to sleep on, I decided it would do for now.

My mother walked by, carrying the laundry basket. When our eyes met, she burst out laughing. "Look at you, being such a good big sister."

"Shrr am," I replied, my face squished against the floor.

"Can I join?"

"No. I'd die." If I hit her with a sarcastic "go for it," chances were she actually would, so I made sure to leave no ambiguity in my refusal.

For the record, though, the pair on top of me weren't that heavy. Yashiro in particular was uncannily light. Factoring in her bioluminescence and ability to fly, she was a strange little creature indeed. She couldn't possibly have originated on this planet, yet she ate our food with gusto, took naps on us, smiled and laughed... Her veneer of childlike innocence let her get away with so much.

Personally, my perspective on her was somewhat uncertain: She was too small to be a peer, yet too distant to be a sister. In my mind, she was somewhere in the middle, and I couldn't quite find the words to describe it. Perhaps Yashiro would only ever be Yashiro to me.

Listening to her and my sister's rhythmic breaths, I closed my eyes and chased the remnants of light behind my eyelids. I wondered vaguely what Adachi was up to. Was every weekend a forty-eight-hour

block of boredom for her? She *did* have a part-time job, which would certainly help pass the time.

Maybe I should get one too, I thought for what was probably the thirtieth time since I'd met her. But I was a lazy little sloth, so I never actually bothered to look for one. Adachi, on the other hand, was the polar opposite: a naturally hard worker. Lately, I'd come to understand that much of her odd behavior was due to her taking every tiny detail way too seriously.

I wouldn't have been surprised if she'd spent her non-work hours studying, with that kind of personality. At the very least, her grades were better than mine—and she had a job on top of that! She was kind of a girlboss, now that I thought about it. Especially since she was doing all that of her own accord without her parents telling her to.

From that perspective, Adachi was pretty much perfect. She had the looks, the personality, and...um...most of the social skills, probably. And she—

Just then, I flinched, as though I'd scratched the surface of my heart.

“Adachi, Adachi, Adachi...”

My nose was itchy, but I couldn't move. *I'm sure thinking an awful lot about Adachi lately*, I reflected, hiding my embarrassment under a forced laugh. At some point, I'd started actively seeking her out, the same way one might start following an ongoing comic on a whim. Whenever I had downtime, like today, I scanned the “pages” in search of her. Perhaps, after long enough, she might even become a mainstream hit.

Yeah, I wouldn't mind that.

Behold: The Warm Glow of Christmas

WHEN I CAME HOME, I found a beautiful woman in a *cheongsam* waiting for me, as per tradition.

“Welcome home.”

“Whoa! Hey, I’m back. Ooooh!”

The blue fabric looked so radiant in the dim light, I forgot all about taking my shoes off. I just stood there in the entryway, admiring her from head to toe. She shrank away, tugging the hem of her slit skirt down, as if the attention embarrassed her.

“I thought you *wanted* me to see it.”

“Yes, but...no!”

To this day, she could be a total mystery to me.

Several Christmases had come and gone since I first moved in with Adachi. Now one had arrived again, and as she did every year, Adachi had dressed in her *cheongsam*. Looking back, I still wasn’t sure why she’d worn it for that first Christmas we spent together, but now it was an essential part of our celebration. Perhaps that was how all traditions started.

As I stepped out of my shoes, the warm air thawed my frozen face into a smile. I walked straight to the dining room to find that the first course of our dinner was pumpkin soup.

“Oh ho. Very Christmassy.”

“Uh...yeah, I guess,” Adachi replied flatly. She had a point—maybe it was more of an overall winter staple. She carried the other side dishes from the fridge to the table one by one.

“Hmmm.” It seemed any trace of a holiday celebration started and ended with Adachi’s *cheongsam*. “Oh yeah, I bought us some cakes. Here.”

I handed her a carryout box of slightly overpriced desserts. When I got to the bakery, it had unsurprisingly been swarming with customers. The Christmas-themed mini roll cakes in the display case cost over three thousand yen apiece, but I’d pretended not to notice.

“Yaaay. Christ...maas.” As usual, Adachi was completely inept when it came to performing excitement, but I liked that about her. The entire box didn’t fit inside our fridge, so she started to take the cakes out, but paused. “Why’d you get three?”

“Oh, don’t worry. The third will likely be gone by tomorrow.”

I was anticipating a holiday visitor who turned up every year on the twenty-sixth. She never came by on Christmas Day itself—not out of consideration for our privacy, but because she was generally too busy stuffing her face at my parents’ house.

Once she’d put the cakes away, Adachi bustled around the kitchen to finish getting dinner on the table while I simply sat there, waiting to be served. She was surely no less exhausted from her own work, yet she had it completely under control. *Wow*, I thought absently as I watched her. There was something to be said for having a pretty girl in a *cheongsam* serve you dinner in a toasty-warm condo late at night.

“Good taste.” *Mine, I mean.* “Yours, I mean.”

“What?”

The “waitress” sat down next to me rather than across the table; she preferred that, and I didn’t mind. Whenever we were face to face, we risked a head-on collision, and even then she wouldn’t budge.

“Does it still look good?” she asked.

“The food?”

From the direction of her gaze, I quickly realized she meant the *cheongsam*. To be fair, we were both in our twenties now. Nearly everything had changed from the first time I’d seen her in the garment—our bodies, our hearts, our attitudes, our relationship...

On second thought, no. Adachi’s heart was probably still the same. Change only took place if the circumstances necessitated it, and a lack of change was valid in its own right.

“However old we get, I’ll always want you to wear that dress.”

However many years passed, Adachi would always be Adachi, and Christmas would always be *cheongsam* season. It was impressive how one single holiday offered so much joy.

“Okay.” Nodding meekly, her lips defrosted into a smile. “I’ll keep wearing it as long as it makes you happy.”

“Yay!”

Having duly expressed my approval, I started eating my pumpkin soup.

Woohoo. Christmas!

A Girl with Privilege

MY FIRST THOUGHT was that she was the kind of girl you could describe in just one word: beautiful. What was so beautiful about her? Everything. Not the most verbose answer, but then again, you couldn't say much about someone who was sleeping.

First, there was her dark, glossy hair, fine and well-moisturized. I didn't know whether she had a hair care routine, but in all regards, hers was in much better condition than mine. Her relaxed, parted lips were pale, as though kissed by youth itself; looking at them now, it was hard to envision their usual flustered flapping, to say nothing of the unintelligible sounds they often made. And though her eyes were closed at the moment, they were a striking shade of blue, like two bottomless underground lakes. Gazing into them had a funny way of sending a crisp breeze racing through my heart, clearing out all the stagnant air.

Put simply, beauty had the power to energize someone.

Compared to Adachi's, most faces appeared clumsily constructed—or was I just biased? At any rate, she was gorgeous. At least, I was pretty sure I remembered hearing people at school describe her that way. Or did I merely want to believe that? Was I just hoping to brag about having a pretty girlfriend? I scratched my head.

Not only was Adachi beautiful, she had a great personality too. She supposedly had a tendency to come off as rude, but I suspected I'd never witness that quality for myself. I was only ever privy to one version of Adachi: passionate and a little insecure, but fully committed. Though her eyes danced away from me at times, they always found their way back, sparkling as naturally as she drew breath. To me, the intensity of her gaze alone expressed every aspect of her character.

Her entire face was simply perfect. Objectively speaking, she was much better looking than I was, though she would aggressively deny that if I said it aloud. Frankly, I was lucky to be in a position to admire her up close as she slept—and that was an opportunity afforded exclusively to me, no less.

Whenever Adachi spent the night at my house, I typically fell asleep first, but this time she'd beaten me to the punch. Her pale skin

practically glowed in the dark room. That struck me as beautiful too. In fact, breathing steadily with her eyes closed, she seemed like a different person altogether.

Part of me felt guilty about driving such a pretty girl to act so oddly, but it wasn't really my fault. Whenever our eyes met, she flinched in surprise, her gaze darting to and fro, almost as if she'd just encountered a monster in the woods. For her, every day was a new adventure teeming with excitement, fear, and yearning. But if I was a demon from the abyss, then she was a greater demon with the power to swallow me whole. I was merely a tasty treat she hoarded for herself.

At times I wondered, *Why me?* A girl as pretty as Adachi could reel in anyone she set her sights on, and I'd only ever known one other person whose beauty could possibly compare to hers. Did the two of them even fall into the same category? The same archetype? Neither seemed likely. *It takes all kinds to make a world, I guess*, I mused to myself wistfully. Yashiro was flawlessly sculpted too, but in a much different way; her beauty was quite literally out of this world.

I was getting off track. Squeezing my eyes and lips shut, I struggled to think through my musings clearly.

Adachi was a girl with infinite options, and there were lots of pretty ladies out there. She could have so much eye candy, it'd give her a *toothache*. Really, if one of us had reason to worry about cheating, it was me—not that I *was* worried, but maybe I should've been!

Was I even the jealous type, though? I decided to test that. As I lay in bed, I reached a hand into the air and stared blankly at my outstretched fingers. At the same time, I imagined Adachi walking down the street, smiling at someone else.

Just like that, it felt as though someone had ripped a piece of my soul out with their bare hands. It would hurt too much to even *look* at the gaping hole left behind.

“Hunh. Wow.”

It was interesting to see how my feelings had evolved. Smiling, I nuzzled my face into the pillow and closed my eyes. But the useless lump attached to my shoulders burned too hot, so I slid a leg from beneath the blanket and unclenched my fist, tortured by the sensation still lingering on my palm.

Of course, I could simply have acknowledged that I was

embarrassed. Instead, though, I took the scenic route. Maybe that was just how embarrassment worked—you yearned for something pure and beautiful, but were never able to approach it directly, which forced you to circle it. At what point had I lost the courage to walk in a straight line? If I could do that before, why couldn't I do it now?

Going forward, I wanted to try to follow my heart, like Adachi did. Well...not *exactly* like she did, since that would be a nightmare, but somewhere in between.

Of all the countless people in this massive world, Adachi had chosen *me*. She probably hadn't even hesitated. She'd offered me her hand, and I took it. Now we walked side by side, surrounded by the unknowable, our hearts filled with scarlet passion.

"I guess it tastes like destiny after all..."

Emboldened by my privilege, I reached out, fingers combing through the night until they reached hers. Since she was asleep, I had nothing to be ashamed of... But, since she was asleep, she didn't grasp my hand in return.

Aww.

Number One!

JUST WHEN I WAS wondering whether Adachi had forgotten our annual New Year's phone call, I heard the doorbell ring, and there she was. Mere hours into the new year, her cheeks were already faintly flushed—like it was any other day.

“Hey,” I greeted her through a yawn.

“H-hey,” she parroted stiffly.

“Happy New Year.”

“You too,” she replied quickly. Then, once she'd stepped out of her shoes, she looked up nervously. “Oh. Uh, am I early?”

I must've looked tired. “I was thinking you were late.”

“What?”

“Well, I was kind of expecting you to call me.” Because of that, I'd stayed up a bit later than usual the night before. But I left that part out.

Her eyes widened. “Oh...I'm sorry.” Yet her barely suppressed smile conveyed anything but guilt.

I considered cracking a joke about that, but resisted the temptation, lest she take it at face value. “Nah. You don't need to apologize.”

“Sh-should I call you right now?”

“Oh, Adachi, I love the way your mind works.” She took my feelings seriously, made an effort to understand them, and looked for a way to set things right instead of simply shrugging them off. That was one of her loveliest qualities, in my opinion—and not just because I stood to benefit. “Well, I hate to drop this on you just after you got here, but...um...my family's driving out to the countryside this afternoon.”

“Oh, right...” Her face fell; I could almost see puppy ears drooping. “We can hang out until lunch, though, right?”

“Yeah.”

She didn't seem to associate the winter holidays with family,

probably because she didn't have much of one. If she had grandparents, I had yet to hear about them—or any other family members, for that matter. Then I realized there was something else I didn't know about her. “Did you want us to spend the holiday together?”

“Yeah, but more than that, I just...wanted to be number one.”

“What?”

“I wanted to be the first person to wish you a Happy New Year... and, um, vice versa.”

“Ah.”

It was such an Adachi thing to say. But technically, the little alien had been the first to greet me this morning. Through a mouthful of New Year's mochi, no less. Now she was napping under the *kotatsu* table with my sister.

“Well...I guess she doesn't count,” I reflected.

Yashiro was exceptional in every sense of the word, but when she greeted me, she'd seemed most concerned about whether to eat her mochi with red-bean jam.

“Oh, Adachi-chan's here!” My mom must've heard us from the kitchen; she strode down the hall. “Happy New Year! Y'know, you could've brought your mother with you,” she continued before Adachi could so much as say “hello.”

“I...er...Happy New Year?” This was a massive curveball for a girl who was already socially inept in general, and Adachi's trepidation was palpable.

“She's flustered! I win!” my mom cheered.

I wasn't enjoying this, so I attempted to make a quick exit. “Let's just go, Adachi.”

“Hougetsu,” my mom said, “I'm sure I don't need to remind you, but after lunch—”

“Yes, yes, I know, thank you!”

Brushing her off, I headed upstairs. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Adachi wave goodbye to her behind me. In the study room, we turned on the heated *kotatsu* and sat down under the blanket.

“Well, now what?”

I must've asked her that question a thousand times since the day we met. The outcome was inevitable: sitting together mostly in silence, like always.

"When you say *countryside*, do you mean, like...to your relatives' house?" Adachi asked, avoiding eye contact.

"Yeah, exactly. I've got a handsome boy waiting for me out there."

I envisioned my grandparents' house, complete with the shrinking form of my dear old friend. With every reunion, I was forced to confront the possibility that it would be the last, and I never wanted to waste a second of it.

The shock on Adachi's face caught me entirely off guard, though. She leaned across the table, her expression deathly serious. "Wh...who are you talking about?"

I blinked. "Who else, silly?"

Then it hit me why she seemed so startled, and I burst out laughing. Gon was a subject I'd never really broached with Adachi—or anyone else, for that matter. Would she get those ominous, complicated feelings out of me someday? Only time would tell.

"Wh-what's so funny?!"

"How should I describe him...? Well, for a start, he's more doglike than you. But only a little." Even Adachi couldn't beat the real thing... right? Surely not.

"I'm not doglike!"

"Right. Of course not. Because you *are* a dog."

"Wha... No! My point is, no two-timing allowed!"

"I'm not two-timing."

"Then what's going on with you and him?!"

"It's...a long story."

She made it sound like I was *actually* cheating on her, which was kind of funny, but also kind of annoying. I stared blankly at her steadfast expression across the table, contemplating how best to explain this.

Being number one in any category was challenging, whether you were the world's fastest runner or just the smartest kid in your class.

Not to brag, but...from Adachi's perspective, I was probably *her* number one...well, insert noun here. Plenty of words fit, and lots of feelings along with them. As long as I was with her, I was always the world's greatest something-or-other, which was...

"Pretty great, huh?" The words slipped out before I could stop them.

"What?" Her eyes widened in surprise.

My gut reaction was to change the subject by saying "It's nothing," but then I had a better idea. "What we have. It's grade A, right?"

"What we *have*?" she repeated, confused by my cryptic wording.

"Graaade A!" I added in a singsong voice.

"Like...a steak?"

I was evidently only confusing her more. She squinted down into the empty space between us, murmuring to herself as she made every effort to solve this riddle.

Meanwhile, I sat back and savored the Grade-A "steak."

An Area of Expertise

THE ENERGY I REGAINED each night from dinner, a shower, sleep, and “Adachi time” was a vital resource I needed to survive the following day.

In general, weekday office work was rarely fulfilling and mostly draining. I liked it about as much as cleaning, which was to say not very much. To me, it was a dull chore, but a necessary part of life—no different from the homework I was assigned when I was a kid. I was never the type of hard worker who could take joy in it.

When lunchtime rolled around, I pulled out the bento that Adachi had packed me. I was impressed to find that its contents were mostly home-cooked rather than store-bought.

“Did you make yourself lunch today, Shimamura-san?” asked a female coworker, her eyes wandering over my desk as she and a group of colleagues passed.

“No. My other half made it for me this morning.”

“Hunh.”

Despite having gone out of her way to ask, she didn’t seem especially interested in the answer. When the group walked off, I thought that would be the end of it, but then a different woman near the end of the procession doubled back.

“Wait, you have a partner? Do you live together?”

“Yeah.”

“A husband?” Her gaze drifted to my left hand in search of a ring.

“Oh, we’re not married.”

“Are you in love?”

“You could say that.”

“Ah, so one of *these*!”

Smiling, she raised her middle finger at me, and I was struck by the strangest feeling of *déjà vu*. Idly, I wondered how Nakayama was doing back in our hometown.

Whenever I brought lunch to work, I ate alone at my desk; on days when I didn't bring one, I typically joined the crowd. I had a decent working relationship with the people in my department, but my name always sounded stiff and formal on their lips. Well, on most people's, I suppose. When I was a teenager, the only exceptions had been Adachi, Hino, and Nagafuji. Then again, I couldn't recall Nagafuji ever addressing me by my actual name at all.

If I'm this hungry by lunchtime, why do I get so sleepy afterward? I wondered as I stuffed bites of white rice into my mouth. Afternoons at work were almost always a battle to stay awake, and I found myself missing the days when I could nap through all my classes and get away with a scolding at worst. Back then, life seemed to carry on regardless, but if I tried the same thing now, it would dissolve my entire future. Perhaps that was simply what it meant to be an adult: to have no other option than to progress along your own path.

Incidentally, Adachi's cooking tasted the same as usual: basic and unadventurous with no distinct flavors. Not to look a gift horse in the mouth, but it was starkly obvious that she had no interest in the culinary arts. As far as I knew, she only cared about one thing, and... well... I was concerned about her ability to build rapport with her colleagues at work. Yet, inexplicably, she seemed to think *I* was the one struggling.

I checked my phone, then sent Adachi a quick message to thank her for lunch. I had a personal policy of minimizing communication with her during work hours, lest either of us get too distracted. Once the bento box was empty, I closed it and sat back in my chair to enjoy the rest of my tea. As I gazed at the faint rays of sunlight streaming in through the closed window blinds, I could feel my eyelids drooping already. If I let myself relax fully, the drowsiness would only get worse. Thus, I rose to my feet and started some stretches.

I wanted nothing more than to clock out and go home—to the place I'd built with Adachi.

Good, I thought as I stretched. I couldn't explain why, but some part of me was satisfied.

As with all things in life, the last part was the most miserable. The moment I realized how close I was to home, exhaustion set in all at once, and I found myself clinging to the elevator wall, viscerally reminded of how hard it was to actually *accomplish* anything. Swaying like the flame of a dying candle, I stumbled down the hall and rang the doorbell.

Once Adachi saw that it was me, she opened the door right away. When I looked into her eyes, it was hard to say which of us was happier.

“Welcome home.”

“Thanks...”

Whenever Adachi got home first, she always met me at the door, and vice versa. On days when I’d returned earlier, I sometimes fell asleep waiting for her, only to spring awake when the doorbell rang. Adachi, on the other hand, never seemed to have that issue. For the most part, I’d only ever seen her brimming with energy. She was simply built differently, inside and out. I wasn’t sure I could possibly outdo her in a single category.

“Heal me, Adachi...”

She wore her blue-rimmed glasses, which told me she’d been in the middle of reading—a magazine, perhaps, or something work-related. Kicking off my shoes, I launched myself forward and slid into the front hall on my stomach.

“I’m so tired... It feels like everything’s weighing on my neck and ribs.”

The hallway floor was nice and cold. If I wasn’t careful, I was likely to fall asleep right then and there, just like Yashiro used to do back at my parents’ house. What a free-spirited little creature she was.

“Heal you? Um...want a massage?”

“Wrong kind of healing.”

“What? How many kinds are there?”

“I want something more...*boneless*.” I didn’t know how to describe it. I just yearned to liquify into a puddle of nothing.

Adachi grabbed my briefcase off the floor where I’d dropped it, paused for a moment, then cocked her head in confusion. “What does

‘boneless’ even mean?”

“I don’t *know*,” I whined without looking up.

Her feet entered my field of vision, her porcelain skin every bit as beautiful as it was in high school. Without warning, I lunged forward and wrapped my arms around her ankles.

“Aeeegh!” she shrieked, recoiling reflexively. Failing to jump out of my grasp, she lost her balance and hastily pressed her hand to the wall to keep herself from toppling over.

Now I felt bad that my silliness had almost gotten her hurt. “Sorry,” I murmured, rubbing my cheek against her feet. They weren’t as cold as the floor, but they still felt nice. “Actually... Hmmm... Yeah, this might work...”

Amusingly, the more I nuzzled her feet, the more she squealed. I knew I should get up and go change out of my work clothes, but I was having too much fun. Exhaling deeply, I practically felt my body melt with fatigue, but at the very least, the weight on my shoulders had lifted. At this point, touching Adachi was perhaps the only thing keeping me from turning to goo.

“Th-there, there, Shimamura. You worked hard today,” she offered as she stooped down to stroke my hair. She’d evidently opted for the consolation route. To me, her awkward stammering made that all the more endearing.

“And?”

“And...uh...you did great! And...I’m proud of you! You’re amazing!” She wasn’t used to giving compliments, so I felt spoiled indeed.

“Ha ha ha ha...” I basked in that warmth, not lifting my head. Sometimes words of affirmation really hit differently; I chewed on those ones for a while before swallowing them fully. “This is exactly the kind of boneless healing I needed.”

“Yeah? Then have some more.”

She went back to tousling my hair—a bit too roughly, since she wasn’t well-versed in the practice. I knew it would look like a mess later, but right now, I didn’t care about that. Like a sleepy cat, I entrusted both my body and spirit to her affection.



Before long, I climbed to my feet, as if I'd been resurrected with especially messy hair. I locked eyes with Adachi. Growing into adulthood, I'd never managed to reach her stature, and our height difference was noticeable at times like these, especially now that she'd stopped slouching so much. Like a tree, she stood tall; I craned my neck upward.

"I bet you worked hard today too," I said.

"Yup."

"Did you miss me? Wait, don't answer—"

"Like crazy."

"That..."

Before embarrassment could set in, Adachi hugged me with a smile. How long had it been since she first overcame her shyness about touching me? She'd come so far... The thought filled me with a swirl of pride mixed with sadness.

"Here we go..."

"Hup, two, three, four..."

Still locked in an embrace, we waddled sideways into the living room. Meanwhile, arrogant though it may have been, I finally thought of a field in which I outshone Adachi: my aptitude for putting a genuine smile on her face.

Effect Permanence

HAD I EVER BEEN the one to take the initiative, or was I always the recipient?

That question first struck me while I was in the middle of taking notes. Now I sat at my desk, chin in hand, combing through my memories while I waited for my next class to start.

It was admittedly an unusually productive train of thought for me. Alas, however I tried, I couldn't recall ever inviting Adachi to hang out. I typically didn't message her first, either.

Was that actually a problem, though? Did my radio silence make her restless with anxiety? If so, I probably needed to accept responsibility and rectify the situation. But either way, she peppered me with calls and messages on a frequent basis, so doing anything in return seemed kind of...unnecessary.

Granted, I wasn't sure that dynamic was healthy; on the other hand, did it need to be? If our relationship had to change to be healthy, Adachi would probably revert it without a moment's hesitation.

Amid the rising tide of classroom chatter, my gaze wandered to the one spot where the level of chitchat appeared to have hit rock bottom. At this distance, Adachi was as quiet as the grave, her profile seemingly sculpted from ice. That impression was bolstered by her downturned eyes, not to mention our winter uniform's muted colors. But when our eyes met, the frost would melt all at once, and I'd see her stiff, half-thawed smile.

That was a nice little...well, not exactly *perk*, but I couldn't find a better word. In any case, it reminded me that she loved me to bits. At the same time, I couldn't help wondering what exactly she saw in me.

Obviously, I wanted to hang out as much as she did; I just didn't ever take action. What would it take to change that?

Whenever Adachi asked, I was happy to oblige. But it was in a passive "Why not...?" kind of way. At present, I had yet to find within myself an assertive "Why not?!" Adachi and I saw each other almost every day, and I was content with that. Maybe that was all it took to

meet my personal needs.

If we were apart for a full week, would my heart finally begin to hunger? Knowing Adachi, I wasn't likely ever to find out. That thought made me chuckle, and my chin nearly slid off my palm.

After a quick readjustment, I considered the possibility more deeply. If we *did* go a week straight without seeing each other, it couldn't be while school was in session. Summer break was also off the table, since Adachi never failed to invite me to hang out every three days or so. But when else would I find a week to spare? If I left town on vacation, she'd just tag along. I simply couldn't picture her agreeing to give me space for a week, however I framed it.

Yeah... That was physically impossible. Even after high school, we'd probably end up together every day; she'd come running to find me. Maybe on some level we'd be teenagers forever, endlessly traveling to and from school and each other's houses. Maybe I'd never stop being Adachi's girlfriend.

Hunh.

For once, I allowed myself to contemplate the future instead of averting my eyes from it.

Yes, our relationship would probably continue. I wasn't planning to break up with her, and I couldn't imagine how she'd react to that—nor did I want to, as the thought was painful (and, in truth, mildly frightening too). If nothing else, I was sure of one thing: we'd stay together, because Adachi would never stop loving me. And, after a certain point, there would simply never be a day I didn't share with her. Ever. For the rest of my life.

“For realsies...?”

What was once a mere high school friendship had ballooned into something much, much more serious: eternity. Till death did us part. Taking Adachi to the grave, and maybe even beyond. That aspect of my future was now set in stone, which was kind of wild, given that I hadn't even decided on a career yet. How else could I describe it? Whatever path I took, from here on, it would include Adachi front and center.

Adachi and me.

Adachi and Shimamura.

We were just two girls the same age who weren't related, who

addressed each other by surname rather than first name or even by a nickname, who hadn't met in elementary or middle school and hadn't deliberately attended the same high school, whose daily lives barely intersected at all. She wasn't family, or a best friend, or a childhood friend, or a pet. I'd never seen inside her closet. She was basically a stranger—a total stranger.

When I first met her, I'd never dreamed our connection would turn out like this. But then she'd fallen in love with me up there in the gym loft. And as the dominoes fell, I found myself giving chase, until at last I reached what could only be called...

"Destiny, I guess," I mused to myself, lifting my head from my palm and turning to gaze out at the bright blue sky.

"Precisely," I thought I heard a little blue voice say, though *she* couldn't possibly have been there.

During the next break, Adachi met my gaze, rose to her feet, and walked over. I waved lazily at her, the fanciful concept of eternity lingering like a haze in my mind. We would spend the rest of our lives together anyway, so I figured maybe it wouldn't hurt to issue an invitation for a change.

Unspoken Acceptance of Our Choice

“PARDON THE INTRUSION.”

“It’s fine. Come on in.”

For once, she walked in from the direction of the front door. Notice that I didn’t say she *let herself in* through the door, since little things like its lock didn’t seem to slow her down. Our Earthling security systems evidently had a long way to go before they would keep aliens out; every year on December 26, Yashiro waltzed in as though invited.

“We’re cleaning the house right now. Go find a corner and entertain yourself.”

“You will find I am quite good at sitting around.”

“Oh, I’ve found that, all right.”

She toddled down the hallway, dressed in an animal onesie as usual, though I couldn’t identify the species.

“What’re you supposed to be this time?” I asked.

“A dugong.”

“Aha.” *How specific.*

“I saw them during the family aquarium visit not long ago.”

“Oh yeah?” Apparently, she was invited to all my family’s outings by default now. That didn’t surprise me in the least. “What’d you guys have for dinner last night?”

“A scrumptious curry.”

With each passing year, my family’s Christmas traditions mystified me more. But since the biggest mystery of all stood right in front of me, I figured I could shrug the others off.

Adachi looked up from her vacuuming. “Oh. You again.”

“Hello there,” the dugong behind me greeted her.

“Uh...hi?”

Yashiro laughed out loud, seemingly delighted. “Today I am not simply intruding. I have come for another reason.”

“Are you implying that you ‘intrude’ on purpose...?” I didn’t think of it that way at all, and I was starting to wonder whether she just didn’t fully grasp the nuance of that word.

“You see,” Yashiro continued, “Mama-san asked me to deliver your gifts.”

“She did, did she?” *Odd.* Couldn’t she have waited a week until we visited on New Year’s Day?

“One moment, please.”

For some reason, Yashiro slipped into our bedroom. Ducking behind the door for a second, she came back out with a plush toy in each of her previously empty hands. I didn’t immediately recognize either creature.

“This one is for you, Shimamura-san.”

“Okay...?”

It was...a walrus, probably, judging by the big pearly whites.

“That walrus is from the aquarium.”

“Ah, so it’s a souvenir.”

“Heh heh heh! For the record, I’m taller.”

“Nobody asked.” The plushie’s mouth opened wide enough to fit my hand inside. With one hand “devoured,” I used the other to stroke the walrus’s back. “Nice and soft.”

Knowing my mother, she’d been too embarrassed to give it to me directly. Despite her general shamelessness, she could be surprisingly bashful when it came to sentimental moments. *The apple sure didn’t fall far from the tree, did it?*

“I’ll let you have some cake later as thanks.” I was going to give it to her regardless, but she didn’t need to know that.

“Yaaay!” Yashiro turned to Adachi. “And this is for you, Adachi-san.”

Adachi switched off the vacuum cleaner and gingerly accepted the other plushie. Unlike mine, it didn’t appear to be from the aquarium. “Uh...th...thanks?”

“That one is from *your* Mama-san.”

“What?” She froze, staring down at the toy’s button eyes and

prominent nose. “Oh, it’s...it’s the elephant...from the zoo...”

“Heh heh heh! For the record, I’m still taller.” This little dugong seemed needlessly competitive. “It is a souvenir from a family visit to the zoo.”

“The zoo *and* the aquarium? You’ve been busy.”

“Ho ho ho! It has been quite fun.”

Adachi’s mom went *with* my family, no less? My mother must’ve dragged her along against her will. Part of me found that surprising, but on second thought, maybe it wasn’t. And even though the gift wasn’t for me, it made me feel...kind of nice. *Yeah, like...* “Aww, nice.”

“I’m happy for you, Adachi.”

“Thanks.”

Her reaction was muted. Holding the elephant, she walked into the bedroom and added the new friend to the shelf that held my seal plush and bear keychain. That left no room for my walrus, so where would I put him? He was still chomping on my hand, which I’d forgotten until now.

“Hmmm...” Adachi gazed at the elephant on the shelf, then mumbled again. “Hm.”

“I’m happy,” I repeated. This time it wasn’t merely on her behalf—the joy was my own.

Adachi glanced at me, then looked back at the elephant. Her lower left cheek twitched. Then, finally, she nodded in acceptance. “Me too.”

Soft and New

“**H**ASHTAG DATE NIGHT! Whooo!”

I leaned in for a photo, holding up a peace sign, and heard a mangled “Wooogh!” beside me as Adachi swiftly recoiled. I normally didn’t notice our height difference, since she was always slouching, but now I started to suspect she’d grown even taller somehow. Her movements were so stiff, I could practically hear her bones creak; it made me chuckle.

“Remember, always ask before you post pics on social media,” I quipped.

“I...I know that!”

“While we’re at it, we may as well actually *take* this photo, huh? Whooo!”

I again struck a casual pose. Meanwhile, Adachi timidly formed a peace sign, her shoulders bunched around her ears, her smile half-formed. How very...photogenic. “Da...da...ni...!”

“Ah, yes. Dadani, my favorite bottled water.”

I paused to consider whether it’d be mean to preserve her silly expression in a photo. Two seconds later I concluded, *Nah*. I snapped the pic, then immediately navigated to it to have a look.

“Hmmm...” On top of Adachi’s mugging, I’d forgotten to smile too. Surely we could do better than this.

“Wh-what was that for?” she asked, utterly flustered by my spontaneity.

Grinning, I put my phone back into my pocket. “I was just trying to make this feel more like a real date.”

Window shopping at the mall had been our weekend pastime since well before we started dating. After all, this small town didn’t have much else to offer. Did big-city girls ever mill around aimlessly like this? It seemed like it’d be exhausting to track down something new and exciting every single time you went out.

“A real date...”

She raised a hand to shoulder height, her fingers squeezing empty air, then stood up straight. I'd never have guessed the quality of our time together had any impact on her posture, but Adachi contained multitudes.

We were bound to encounter other people from our high school, but I was too lazy to remove myself from Adachi's personal bubble. Instead, I walked shoulder to shoulder with her, taking big steps to match her pace. Thanks to the air conditioning, I didn't need to let go of her sweaty hand either.

"We must be pretty confident to do this, huh?" I mused aloud with a grin.

A *less-than-confident* Adachi stiffly rotated her head to look at me. "Uh...do what?"

"Goof off while everyone else studies for college entrance exams."

During summer break, we'd been hanging out at least twice a week; Adachi initiated each time. If we'd ever gone a full week or two without seeing each other—not that that was likely—would I have gotten lonely enough to invite *her* out? Yeah, maybe. At that point, my goal was to always live true to myself.

"Oh... Well, we could go back to your place and study!" she suggested hastily.

"No, I'm not going to study with you."

"Wh-why not?"

Because that wouldn't work. With our textbooks out in front of us, my mind would inevitably wander in search of entertainment, and I'd get distracted. I'd learned that the last time we tried it.

Instead of just telling her that, I smirked and pointed at her chin. "Because Ada-cheechee will get hor-neenee."

Swiftly reminded of the incident a few days earlier, Adachi blushed so bright, it almost looked like she'd been crying tears of blood. It was the most beautiful shade of red in all the world—to me, at least. But as I waxed poetic to myself, she started smacking me, raining her excess embarrassment down onto my back and shoulders. It was the first time I'd ever experienced a sudden shower while indoors.

"Ow! Stop!" I joked, laughing it off.

In all sincerity, I could probably have studied just fine with Hino or Nagafuji. When it came to Adachi, though, I'd prefer to look for a more fun activity. She brought out my mischievous side in a way no one else could hope to replicate. For that matter, she brought out a *lot* of things—just by being uniquely her.

On second thought, scratch that. Nagafuji would probably cause chaos of her own. In some ways, she was more of an unidentified life-form than any blue-haired alien.

Meanwhile, Adachi's smacking continued unabated. She'd usually have stopped by now, right? Concerned about the bruise that was liable to form on my shoulder, and half-wishing I'd brought an umbrella, I looked up at her—and she grabbed my face with both hands, squishing my cheeks flat.

“Mmfgh!”

“It's okay if you don't want to study with me. But...”

“Mm-hmm?”

As sweat rolled down from her scalp, her expression hardened. “That doesn't mean you can study with anyone else either.”

Once again, her emotions shackled me down. At this point, I'd lost track of how many chains I was buried in. In the beginning, her jealousy had been utterly perplexing, but before I knew it, I'd grown attached to it. Our relationship seeped into my every blood vessel like an analeptic.

“Ha ha!”

“It's not funny.” She squished my cheeks harder, the way I typically did to Yashiro.

“Mmffgghh!” For the first time, I discovered what it was like to be on the receiving end; in other words, I was having a great time. I could feel body heat from the slightest movement of Adachi's fingers, which sent something dripping down my neck.



“I won’t, okay? I won’t study for a single second!”

“Wait, that...uh...that seems like a bad idea.”

Timidly, Adachi retracted her hand. I stared at it for a moment. Then, on a whim, I leaned against her shoulder and linked my arm in hers. Nuzzling my cheek against her bicep, I felt a silly laugh slip out. In that moment, everything seemed to shine.

Adachi flinched at first, but held her ground as scarlet crept over her face once more, this time all the way to the tips of her ears. The sight was a relief, really. “Sh-Shimamura, you’re not normally this...”

“This what?”

As usual, her eyes darted and her knees knocked. After combing through her vocabulary for a moment, she tossed out, “Flirty?”

Yes—to shed my former self who would only ever melt lazily in the summer sun, I’d begun to flirt with a new future.

“I mean, we *are* on a date, you know.” I rested my weight against the slightly—well, more than slightly—taller frame of my girlfriend, entrusting my everything to her.

“Gaaaaah!”

Unfortunately, my everything pushed her off-balance, and we very nearly toppled to the ground.

The Spice of Life

WAS IT HUMAN NATURE to seek out new flavors, even when the old ones were still perfectly fine? What did it mean to be human, anyway? That night, I found myself sinking deeper and deeper into such philosophical pondering.

If any of my inherent traits could be considered an unmistakable virtue, perhaps it was my ability to fall asleep.

Christmas was coming, and for us, that was *cheongsam* season—assuming Adachi would wear the dress, but I was pretty sure she would. As much as I enjoyed her little waitress act, I found myself wondering with each passing year whether I ought to do something for her in return.

My usual evening commute involved little more than swaying lethargically on the train. Whenever I had a conundrum worth mulling over, though, that drowsiness mercifully retreated, letting my brain sort out my jumbled thoughts. You could say that I came alive in those otherwise ordinary moments. Sensation ran from my elbows all the way to the backs of my hands, driving home the reality of everything.

I briefly considered wearing the dress myself this year, but that thought didn't sit right with me. The *cheongsam* was Adachi's thing, and the prospect of crossing that line struck me with unease, like flipping a rock over to see what was underneath. No, I'd need my own special outfit... But what?

A few days before Christmas, I struck on an answer, inspired by a little sea otter loudly slurping up udon noodles like she owned the place.

"Yeah. Something like that might just work," I murmured.

"Mmmh?"

"You know, I'm surprised an alien from outer space has such a masterful command of chopsticks."

"Heh heh heh. I am what you might call a 'weeb.'"

I don't think anyone would call you that.

And so, when Christmas Day rolled around, I arrived home ahead of Adachi, put our three small cakes in the fridge, and changed into my costume. At this point, I'd seen so many similar outfits throughout my life that looking at myself in the mirror gave me intense *déjà vu*.

"Eh, it's fine," I told myself.

I prepped dinner as I waited for Adachi to get home. Then...

"Welcome back!"

After opening the door, she took one look at me and froze in place.

"No, Yashiro didn't have a growth spurt," I clarified quickly.

I'd opted for a safe choice: a reindeer onesie, complete with antlers on the hood.

Adachi paused to take it in, then smiled stiffly. "Oh, I get it. Because it's Christmas."

Having figured out my outfit, she shut the door behind her. As she pulled her shoes off, I took her briefcase. "Glad you're home."

She looked up in response, her eyes fixed on my antlers. "Uh... that's...really cute."

I was proud of her for giving the compliment before I even had to fish for it (that was something I needed to work on myself). Then I caught a whiff of her scent in the winter air that surrounded her, and mischief came to mind. Leaning against her shoulder, I whispered: "Come on in."

"...? Uh...y-you too...? Er..."

"Is it your first time here, miss?"

Adachi flinched so hard that she dropped her shoe, grimacing. It truly warmed my heart to see her so obviously flustered.

"My first time *where*?"

"Oh...uh...wherever reindeer live, I guess?"

"The North Pole?!"

She held her hands up in a confused gesture, so I grabbed them and pulled her to her feet. "Come on, Adachi. Time to wear your *cheongsam*." With that, I led her down the hall.

"Wh-what does my *cheongsam* have to do with reindeer?"

“Who says they have to be related?” She looked so utterly perplexed, it was hard not to burst out laughing. “It just isn’t Christmas for me until I see it.”

Through memories, through affection, and through the slit that ran up the side—it was the *cheongsam* that kept us connected to the folly of our youth.

The World's Best-Kept Secret

WHEN I CAME HOME from school, I found a monkey in the hallway, kneeling on a blanket with several objects laid on top.

“Welcome hooome!”

“...Thanks.”

At some point, that greeting had stopped feeling weird coming from Yashiro, of all people. As I took my shoes off, I glanced over at her; she beamed back, waiting patiently with her tail swishing back and forth as if it were real.

I decided to oblige her. “All right. What’re you up to this time?”

The blanket was littered with stones of all shapes and sizes, at least one of which was striking enough to give me pause.

“I am holding a bazaar. Raar.”

I wasn’t sure that was the sort of sound a monkey was supposed to make, but okay.

“Papa-san taught me that a bazaar is when you peddle wares atop a blanket. I can use my earnings to purchase treats afterward. Raar.” Her tail swished eagerly.

“Ha ha... I see.” An alien’s mind seemed to work in mysterious ways. “So you decided you’d sell...rocks?”

“Ho ho ho! *Locally sourced* rocks.”

“Ah, of course.” How very convenient. Having decided to humor her, I crouched and picked up the nearest of the homegrown stones to get a better look. “Where’d you find this one?”

The gray mass filled my palm, its surface bumpy and rough. I vaguely remembered seeing something similar at the beach a long time ago.

As I trawled through my memories, she responded, “The moon.”

“What...?” I tilted my head, peering past the rock.

“I found it when I went to the moon earlier,” the monkey replied from the other side, beaming.

“*That* moon?” I pointed upward, in the direction of the only “moon” I was aware of.

“Yes, that moon,” she replied, pointing in a different direction. Somehow, without even looking outside to check, I sensed that she’d pinpointed the moon’s current location flawlessly.

So...this was a moon rock. I didn’t feel any strange aura emanating from it, nor did its touch threaten to mutate me, like in a video game. Yet my fingers felt magnetically pulled toward the rock’s surface, and slowly but surely, an emotional reaction was building inside me... So, while I waited for it to arrive, I used my free hand to pick up a second stone. This one was smooth and contoured, like one of dozens you might find in a riverbed.

“What about this one?”

“I found it floating nearby.”

Since when did rocks *float*?

“And that one?” I gestured at a flat rock.

“I found it near the fishing hole.”

I soon discovered that her idea of “locally sourced” was broader than mine. She’d taken the stones from ocean floors, mountain peaks, even planets I’d never heard of. As her explanations flowed like water, I felt myself float away into the haze between dreams and reality. Was I being bewitched by a monkey? Was that a thing monkeys could do?

“Okay, then... One moon rock, please.”

“Yaaay!” She raised both hands into the air to celebrate her successful sale.

Then I realized I’d forgotten to ask a crucial question. “How much is it?”

“One hundred yen.”

Uh...that’s a little cheap for a moon rock, isn’t it? “And how much for the fishing-hole rock?”

“That rock is also one hundred yen.”

Was she bad at pricing things, or did she genuinely feel that a jaunt to the moon wasn’t a bigger hassle than visiting the fishing hole? As often as I found her lounging around our house like a pet, there were times she felt far removed from me.

“Raar!”

I was also pretty sure a “bazaar” was normally a charity event, but whatever.

That day, Yashiro’s bazaar turned a profit of four hundred yen. She was so pleased that she walked around the house clutching the coins in her tiny fist for the whole evening. As for the rocks that failed to sell, she told me she’d “put them back” in the morning. However obscure the locations, I was sure she’d reach them and return without any trouble at all.

In March, the night breeze hadn’t yet shaken the winter frost off fully; it melted against the heat of my cheek. I sat in front of my bedroom window, which I’d cracked open, gazing at the starry sky and enjoying the whistle of the breeze that slipped in. My heart grew light as I listened to it.

That night, I had a perfect view of the moon...and, as I gazed into its radiance, I held up the object in my hand.

“Did *this* really come from *there*?”

I raised the rock until it blocked the moon from my sight. Unlike its (alleged) home, the rock was dull and lightless, with no trace of a sparkle to be seen in it. My forearm started to feel its weight.

Then a thought began to sink in. A moon rock! From the surface of the moon! Something most people would never have a chance to touch—yet here it was, in the palm of my hand! *Wow*. Sheer awe diffused through my body, thrilling me to the point of restlessness.

Of course, I was assuming it was *actually* from the moon. But Yashiro wasn’t the type to lie—she didn’t need to. That alone proved that she wasn’t human. If I kept an eye on the moon, maybe I’d eventually see her toddling around up there. The thought put a smile on my face. I shifted my legs, lifting my feet toward the sky to pretend I could moonwalk on high too.

As I gazed at the moon and its rock simultaneously, my reactions were simple and straightforward. *Wow. Incredible*. Was I really allowed to touch outer space this casually? I always manhandled our little pet

alien, granted. Still, I never dreamed I'd one day hold a rock from the *moon*. That little stone had traveled so far to get here...and now it sat right in my palm.

If this was how it felt to be given the moon, I could only imagine how I'd react if I actually went there myself.

Astronauts had to put in a huge amount of work to travel into space; they learned things most of us would go to the grave never knowing. It was a foregone conclusion that a lazy sloth like me could never reach those heights. Yet...those same astronauts would never know Adachi like I did. However far their rockets traveled, they'd never find her.

On the other hand, Adachi sometimes showed me things I'd surely never see in any other corner of the universe...so...

Suddenly, I couldn't find the words to finish my train of thought. Perplexed by the sudden onset of stubborn pride, I could only laugh at myself.

Basically, aliens and moon rocks couldn't possibly compare to *her*.

"Ha ha...!"

At that point, I thought of a great idea. I'd show Adachi the moon rock tomorrow, brag about it, maybe even let her feel it in the palm of her hand.

Having found something fun to look forward to, I didn't lament the day's end. In fact, I welcomed it. Perhaps this was true happiness for me.

"Take a look. These are the latest images we received."

"What...*is* that?"

"Exactly what it looks like. A monkey has been sighted on the moon. It's nothing short of a shocking revelation, to say the least."

"A monkey? I would sooner have expected a rabbit."

"That's just an old folktale. There are no rabbits on the moon."

"Yes, well, I thought there were no monkeys either."

“Yet this image appears to depict one from behind. It even has a tail.”

“It’s too small to make out clearly.”

“You’ll have to blame the moon for being so far away.”

“For that matter, why does this moon monkey look so *ordinary*? Why, one might think it’s merely a child hopping along in a costume.”

“That would raise its own set of concerns.”

“To me, it kind of looks like D*nkey K*ng.”

“It...does?”

“Do we have any shots of it from the front?”

“Sadly, no.”

“...Surely it must’ve been photoshopped.”

“That *is* possible. But if we’re to believe this image, then we’re looking at a bona fide extraterrestrial! Isn’t that incredible?”

“If it lives on the moon, it could potentially visit us down here too.”

“Or maybe it already lives among us!”

I turned away from the TV, squinting at the cheerful creature playing Othello with my sister.

“Ho ho ho! That move will cause me to lose the game, Little!”

“You’re not supposed to tell her that... Eh, whatever.” Shrugging it off, I stretched out my legs. By the time I turned back to the TV, the show had moved to its next segment.

Fruits of the Future

STANDING OUT ON the boat's deck, I reflected on my life and realized just how much I had enjoyed myself thus far. Frankly, I'd thought I tuned out for most of it. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that I could look back on more than a few memories—even some I couldn't quite place—as if a seal on them had broken at last. Dozens of still images from throughout my life fluttered past my mind's eye, all out of order.

Weird. Isn't there a word for times like these...? Eh, forget it.

The harsh ocean breeze dampened my cheek with a hint of salt as the ship carved through the water, pitching and groaning. The harder I fought to keep my balance, the more I felt like I was riding a giant sea creature's back. I held a hand to the top of my head, securing my hat firmly in place, and waited for the updraft to subside. There was something soothing in its howl.

However fast we went, I was sure the smell of the sunbaked sea would be right behind us.

Then I heard footsteps on the stairs, and turned. "Heeey!"

"Hey," Adachi replied. The slight stiffness in her voice was adorable and nostalgic. She walked up beside me, and together we leaned against the...uh, taffrail, I think it was called...to enjoy the view of the endless ocean.

"Been a while since our last boat ride, huh?"

The drone of the ship must've drowned out my voice, because Adachi didn't seem to catch what I said. She mouthed a silent question at me: "What?"

I repeated myself, louder this time.

"Ah, yeah," she nodded. "What was the last one? The, um...school trip?"

"No, that was two boats ago. Remember?" I held up my fingers as if in a peace sign.

She looked at each finger in turn, then put a hand to her chin.

“Oh. Right.” Craning her neck, she peered past my hand into my eyes—intensely.

“What is it, dear?”

“It’s kind of weird that *you* of all people remember better than me... Er, I mean, not *weird*. I’m just...surprised. But not in a bad way!”

She was hesitating over her word choices, but she didn’t need to—I understood what she was saying. Yeah, maybe it was kind of out of character for me, but it was her fault; this was simply the person I’d turned into after meeting her.

“Believe it or not, there are plenty of memories I *do* care about,” I replied.

The shining fruits of our labor cast light upon our silver past and golden future. If at any point I forgot something, I could simply ask Adachi to remind me of it, and vice versa. And if neither of us could remember something? Well...it’d be really funny.

She reached out to the blue ribbon on my white hat and gave it a tentative prod. “That looks good on you, by the way.”

“Thanks.” I’d bought the hat as a souvenir on another of our trips, and now I never went anywhere without it.

At that point, a thought occurred to me, and I put the hat onto her head instead. She reached up to secure it; then a smile gradually spread across her face. She’d gotten much better at expressing her emotions over the years, and when it occurred to me that I’d had the privilege of watching her progress firsthand, the waves in my mind began to ebb and flow.

“Well, what do you know?” I said. “It looks good on you too.” Not that I could get a good look at her with the boat rocking.

With a breathy laugh, she pulled the brim low, ensuring the wind wouldn’t whisk the hat away. Then she stepped closer, spreading her arms wide. For a moment, she froze again, as if her internal batteries had run out of energy. But then she came back to life, wrapping her arms around me in a big hug. Her added weight threatened to make my knees buckle. Nevertheless, I fought to keep us both upright, returning the embrace and taking in her scent as it mingled with the sea breeze.

“Nothing’s keeping us apart anymore...right?” she asked, as if for my blessing.

“Right,” I nodded.

Relieved, she buried her face in my shoulder.

“We’ve come so far...and there’s still so much farther to go.”

But from here on, we’ll chart this course together.



**Then the
Age of Silver**

The Moon in My Sky

AS I (QUITE LITERALLY) fled the living room, it finally sank in: Shimamura's father had just wished me a happy, fun life—with his daughter.

She's all yours.

As I retreated to the bedroom at the end of the hall, relief and disappointment rose in my chest at the same time. Shimamura was apparently still in the shower. Kneeling in the center of the bedroom, I first contemplated whether we were happy together.

Yes.

We were fairly happy—no, decently happy—okay, pretty happy—maybe really happy? Was that an exaggeration? Personally, I felt I could reasonably argue that we were indeed *really happy* together. After all...

The memory of Exhibit A came rushing back, and my ears grew hot.

Anyway, yes, we were happy—but was our life together *fun*? If you could define fun as “lighthearted pleasure,” I was unmistakably having it. Granted, I'd spent my fair share of time crying too, and wailing, and screaming, and throwing tantrums. On the other hand, Shimamura had inspired all those feelings in me. Thus, they still fell under the “fun” umbrella.

There it was: I could honestly say that my life with her was happy and fun. That thought actually made me a little emotional. It seemed to me that I was in fact equipped to give Shimamura the life her dad wanted for her.

Relieved, I glanced around the chilly room. A strange, lumpy rock sat atop Shimamura's desk like an ugly paperweight—the same one she'd proudly declared a moon rock. I couldn't tell whether it was authentic, but she seemed to really like it.

To me, the moon was a desolate rock I'd surely spend my whole life never visiting. If I were ever stranded there with Shimamura, though, I suspected I could make it work. I could go to my grave there,

satisfied with the life I'd lived. If all my yearning was distilled to one single wish, it would be this: to be alone with Shimamura. The location didn't matter as long as she was there with me.

At times I suspected that I might pour a little too much of myself into this relationship... Yet part of me was so wholeheartedly devoted, it somehow didn't feel like enough.

Love and affection didn't come easily to me. I could tell I lacked the sort of innate curiosity about the world that so many others seemed to possess. That was probably why, when I finally found an outlet for what feelings I *did* experience, I'd rushed so clumsily to fling them out at full force. Therefore, I couldn't do anything to change the fact that, like it or not, Shimamura was the moon in my sky. At this point, I couldn't imagine going back to a life of only ever observing it from a distance.

Then Shimamura burst in with a preemptive strike: "I'm all yours!"

Déjà vu. I wasn't sure what this "all yours" business was about. Evidently today was just one of those days—not that I could exactly describe what sort of day I meant.

In any case, Shimamura looked like she was having way more fun than I was...so I decided to give her a run for her money.

Buried in Summer

THE FIRST TIME I heard her surname said aloud, it sounded so soft.

Shimamura. Or maybe “soft” was just her general vibe.

She was a classmate whose first name I didn’t even know. We’d met in the gym loft entirely by chance—most likely drawn to each other on a whim. Then that happened a second time, and a third, and now... Well, by this point, I’d lost count.

Summer was still in full force, and sweat glued my shirt to my back. The more I focused on that, the more uncomfortable I felt, so instead I stared at the floor and tried to keep my mind as blank as possible. The stagnant air burned my throat when I inhaled, but eventually I got used to it.

Taking a sip of lukewarm bottled water, I shot a passing glance at Shimamura next to me. Her (I assume) bleached hair stood out against the gym’s muted white walls. Her summer uniform was disheveled, her socks discarded. From the way her eyelids drooped in tandem with her chin, she looked like she might fall asleep at any moment, which was impressive given the heat. As I gazed at her, I resisted the urge to follow suit.

Not that I had anything important to stay awake for right now—well, aside from the fact that school was in session, but I *had* chosen to disregard that and retreat up here while everyone else was in class. Oddly enough, I found it kind of fun to be so far removed from the others, though I lacked the vocabulary to fully explain the thrill.

Now there were two of us, though.

I didn’t like being around people. I was constantly on edge in social situations, afraid of messing up, and it left me utterly drained. It really couldn’t be more obvious that I was better suited to solitude. Yet here I was with Shimamura.

“Hey, Adachi?” she said, her voice as lethargic as both our eyes.

“What?” I asked through slightly parted lips, not turning my head to look at her.

“How come...” There was a small pause; a cicada’s weakened wail

briefly filled the silence. “Never mind.”

“Come on, don’t leave me hanging. Now I’m curious.”

“Oh yeah? Good. Maybe the mystery will keep you coming back.”

Our conversation had rounded edges, like the slightest trace of a dream, and bounced back and forth with all the energy of a ping-pong ball. Perhaps Shimamura was also enjoying this more than she let on.

“Makes sense.” In that case, she *would* be better off keeping it to herself.

If I had to guess, she was probably going to ask why I bothered coming to school at all if I was just going to sit in the gym loft instead of going to class. But at this point, I couldn’t recall what specifically had driven me away. I suspected Shimamura’s story was much the same. We had no real reason to play hooky—no motive to come up here. Most likely, neither of us actually knew what we were doing.

If we *did* have a reason, however trivial...maybe that would’ve made things interesting. Maybe if I left the house with some compass to follow, it would’ve made the long walk easier. Sure, I broke the rules of what was “normal,” but still...I found myself hoping to stay buried in summer for just a little longer.

When it came time to crawl back out, I knew I’d be on my own again.

Dragon Hammer

AS SHE SAT BESIDE ME in class, Adachi-san kept almost perfectly still. Her head faced forward, stationary; only her eyes moved from the chalkboard to her notebook and back. At first, her focus impressed me, but then it occurred to me that maybe she simply had no interest in anything around her.

For as long as we'd shared this classroom, I had basically never seen anyone speak to her, and for good reason. The air around her was so parched that anybody could tell at a glance how little she cared. Her eyes were like two pinpricks of light in a pitch-dark shroud. If I had to, I'd have guessed that she probably didn't know the name of a single classmate, myself included.

If she were ugly, that would've been one thing, but Adachi-san was blessed with the kind of looks no one could fully ignore. Even when she just sat there, she had a way of commanding attention. Confronted with such unequivocal beauty, I wrestled with two competing desires: the temptation to try reaching out, versus the urge to avoid the frustration that would surely follow rejection. Inevitably, the latter desire won.

To be fair, I couldn't exactly picture Adachi as an eager participant in my friend group, nor did I really want to. In my eyes, she was simply too far out of our league—although not in a self-important way. Rather, she was detached from the world around her. If there were any way to bring her back down to Earth, I'd be curious to see it for myself, but I doubted I'd ever get the chance.

Perhaps one day, someone would get Adachi-san's attention all to themselves. I could only imagine how special that would make them feel.

Alas, sitting beside her was the only privilege I'd ever have. So I spent the day like any other: taking notes, sneaking glances, and relishing my front-row seat.

Soaring Flash

“**R**IGHT THIS WAAAY!”

“Let me know when you’re ready to *orrerder!*”

“I’ll be with you in a *momennnnnt!*”

“Have a good *niight!*”

I watched out of the corner of my eye as the restaurant manager schmoozed with customers at the table next to me.

Suddenly, she turned in my direction and beckoned me over.
“Now your turn. Repeat after me.”

“What?”

“You always speak too *slowwwly!* Speak faster, like *meee!*”

How is that faster?

“You are like zombie! Same face and voice always!”

“Okay...?”

“You don’t have to kiss ass. Just try to hide how little you care. Not that *most* people care about their job, huh? Kah ha ha ha ha!”
Cackling, she disappeared into the back room.

She seemed to be implying that my customer service skills needed work—although if you asked me, my most glaring issue at work was my so-called “uniform.” I tugged its hem down nervously.

I’d thought I was doing a decent enough job, but maybe I was lacking.

I scanned the restaurant’s tables, chairs, even the decorations on the walls. Once we opened for business, people came in and sat down, and...that was it. As far as I could tell, there was no deeper meaning to any of it. What was I supposed to look at, or see, or *feel*? It was all the same to me, so it was only natural that my responses were always identical.

I could vaguely remember people I used to like...dreams I used to have...somewhere in the distant past, across the gulf of time. But at some point those things faded away, as if every morning I sloughed off

the lichen of emotions that had previously constituted my identity. Along the way, I'd learned that feeling things was stressful, frustrating, and generally exhausting. Now, I'd sunk to the stillness of rock bottom, and I didn't feel the need to climb back up.

Perhaps, after long enough, the river of time would polish me so smooth that even the lichen would stop growing. That didn't sound so bad. Life was easier when nothing ever happened.

Gazing at the crooked crimson tables surrounded by nothing but empty chairs, I almost convinced myself that I was seeing the future.

Wintry Wind

AT ANY GIVEN TIME, I preferred to be in Shimamura's orbit. In close proximity, she filled my vision, blocking out the rest of the world.

Between classes, I decided to bring her out of the classroom, all the way down to the opposite end of the hallway. Fortunately, despite her yawning, she was willing to oblige.

"What's the matter, Adachi?"

"Well...during class, I just...don't get enough of you, that's all."

She gave me an exasperated smile. "Oh, you poor thing."

My explanation wasn't eloquent, so it came across weirdly. Still, it was fundamentally accurate: I was starved for her. The entire time I spent staring at the chalkboard, taking notes on autopilot, I thought about Shimamura. And although, yes, I was supposed to pay attention in class, I'd struck upon a critical revelation: my mental image of her was beginning to blur. I could envision the broad strokes, sure, but what about the way her hair fell against her ears, the slight movements of her eyes, or the exact shape of her fingernails? My mental replica was already starkly inadequate; it lacked her scent and overall vibe. If I sat through another class, I might lose even more of her. I couldn't afford to take that risk.

When I asked to hold hands, she agreed and offered me one. I pressed each of her finger joints, committing them to memory.

"Are you trying to massage my pressure points?" she joked.

Obviously, the answer was no—I was just getting a feel for her—but I went ahead and played along. "Is...is this where you're sore, madam?"

"Uh, now you're taking my pulse."

Oh. I was grasping her wrist, and sure enough, I felt a faint throb under my fingertips—the inner rhythm of her beating heart. I was almost certainly the only one who'd ever feel it.

"Having fun?" she asked after a moment.

"Huh?"

“You’re smiling.”

I couldn’t tell on my own, so if Shimamura said I was smiling, then I must’ve been. “Not...*fun*, exactly.” Though, admittedly, I was gloating a bit. “This is just...really calming.”

“Yeah. You’re calm, all right,” she snickered, glancing toward the empty classroom.

I know, I know. I understood the implication: That, in her presence, I was *anything* but calm. When I wasn’t touching her, my mind wandered; when I was, my soul ascended to cloud nine. *Sorry I’m like this.*

We stood there for a good five minutes or so in what could only be called a “handshake” position. It was both thrilling, and deeply perplexing, just how many feelings another person’s hand could inspire in me. I found I didn’t mind the rush; on the contrary, it was rather soothing.

“Thanks.”

“Mm-hmm!”

Since our break time was coming to an end, I reluctantly pulled away. If only we were in Shimamura’s bedroom instead.

“Hey, um... Sorry,” I told her on the way back to the classroom.

“Huh? For what?” Shimamura gestured with her newly freed hand.

“Well, you looked really sleepy earlier, so...”

“Eh, I’m always sleepy.”

It wasn’t easy to check in on Shimamura, since her desk was diagonally behind mine, but sometimes I snuck a glance over my shoulder and spotted her rubbing her tired eyes. She usually caught me looking, and her exasperated smiles gave my heart a little squeeze.

Seemingly sensing something in my currently expression, she scrutinized my face. A tender, almost motherly smile spread across her lips, and she rushed ahead.

“Listen, Adachi, it’s cool if you need a little reassurance now and then,” she told me without looking back, as if concealing her face. “Like...I really don’t mind. It’s nice to be needed...especially by a pretty girl like you. Ha ha!”

“Oh.”

When Shimamura felt embarrassed, she usually liked to tack a joke on. That made me a little bashful too, since a joke indicated that she meant every word prior. She was never very direct about her heart's inner workings, but every now and then, she sent a tidal wave crashing over me.

Yet while I appreciated her feelings, and that she was willing to share them, I balked at the implication that I was massively clingy. Really, I was just...you know, *a little* clingy. “I...I’m not a needy little baby or whatever.”

“Gah hah hah hah! Good one!”

She seemed to find that hilarious, so I quietly conceded, tucking my trampled dignity back into its box. At least now I was confident that I could imagine her accurately for the rest of the school day—which was the only way I could be with her when we were forced apart.

Vortex

I LOVE SHIMAMURA.

“Love...”

I buried my face in my knees, and a long, muffled sigh pushed past my tense lips. As I swayed back and forth, my emotions swayed with me. I wasn't crying, yet my cheeks felt warm—a wet heat entirely distinct from that of the surrounding summer. It made my eyes fuzzy, almost like I was adrift at sea.

“God, I love her... I love...love...”

As if I were sleep-talking, my feelings tumbled out. Oddly enough, this tended to happen far more often when she *wasn't* around to hear. Maybe my heart was reaching out to bridge the distance between us or something. But now, I could revel in the fact that Shimamura loved me back.

My fingers tightened against my legs, and I heaved another sigh. Whenever I closed my eyes, I saw her—proof that I was terminally smitten, yes, but I was happy. I was definitely a terminal case, though. That could be why I didn't get much sleep at night. Maybe, in my case, health and happiness simply couldn't coexist.

Lately, Shimamura seemed more mellow—and consequently, more beautiful than ever before. When she smiled at me, her eyes twinkled as if I were the sun. Just thinking about that struck me like a meteor—that is, it made me slam my face into my pillow.

What was it I loved so much about her? She was utter perfection, down to every last hair on her head, so it was impossible to make a rational assessment... On second thought, no, maybe that *was* rational. Objectively speaking, Shimamura was constantly radiant. *Yeah, that's it.* I felt my fingers and toes tremble in agreement.

I like her because she's shiny? What am I, a crow? I thought, flopping down on my bed. *Well, hold on—surely I'd still like her even if she weren't shiny, right? Ugh, what am I even thinking about?!*

Unable to lie still, I tossed and turned, sighing over and over. Ever since I met Shimamura, it had felt as though I was tumbling down an

endless stone staircase, hitting every sharp edge on the way. Everything blurred together so fast, I scarcely even registered the pain.

At first, I thought maybe that was normal, but when I'd stopped to look around, it quickly became apparent that it was just me. I was the only one falling head over heels for Shimamura, and that honor made me feel more alive than any bump or bruise.

Resting my chin on the pillow, I thought about how much I missed her...and the next thing I knew, I was reaching for the phone, my elbow propped up, out of the fervent desire to see her. As I raised the phone to my ear, the breath I was holding slipped out in a weird grunt. Then...

“Oh...”

The moment I reached Shimamura and heard her exhale on the other end, my field of vision lit up—as though I'd passed through a dark tunnel into a whole new world. Her sparkle was simply too contagious.

Tempest

“**A**DACHI, CAN I RIDE on you for a sec?”

At first, I didn't understand what Shimamura was asking. Ride on me? *Ride*? I pictured myself as a bicycle, carrying her along on my back.

“Uhh...”

We were at her house, in our usual spot upstairs: the second-floor study room. One moment, we were discussing how we should probably try to get out of the house more, and now she was asking this—as if the idea had struck her out of the blue.

“H-how?” I asked.

“Just lie down real quick. On your stomach.”

“Ookay...”

As instructed, I flopped onto the floor. Where exactly was she going to climb on...? Was I supposed to suggest a spot? And why did she want me on my stomach for this? Confused, I stared blankly at a point on the wall low enough that I wouldn't normally have examined it.

A shadow fell over the floor in front of me.

I heard her approach...*felt* her approach...and in a few moments, a humanoid mass of warmth loomed over me, its outline blurring into pure softness. A beat later, a realization struck me like a brick to the skull, and a jolt of electricity sent sparks shooting from my eyes.

“Kah...khaaah...!” A strangled yelp crawled up my throat. There was so much pressure on my eyes, I thought they might pop. Shimamura was now quite literally straddling me—riding on top of me.

Riding? Yes, riding! She's riding my body—my back! This is the closest I've ever been to her clothes, her skin, her—gthppt! Somehow, I managed to bite the tongue of my inner voice.

The backs of my thighs throbbed as if I'd grown two more hearts, while my *actual* heart stopped beating completely. It felt like my throat had ripped open and begun leaking sallow fluid. My ears rang louder and louder, the sound reverberating inside my skull until I was queasy.

That torture proved that what was happening was real. Shimamura's real-life body was overlapping with mine, her legs pinning mine down, her stomach and...*other areas*...pressed right against my back.

"Ttkkttkktgg..." An unintelligible, throaty grunt pushed past my teeth, rippling the blood pooling inside my mouth.

"Hunh. So this is what it feels like."

What what feels like? What what what what what what?
Whaaaaaaat?!

"As an older sister, I'm used to having people climb on me, but never the other way around."

I heard Shimamura talking, but my jaw flapped uselessly, unable to produce a single word in response. My forearms shook harder and harder with each passing second until my whole body quaked. Why now, when she and I were closer than ever, was I suddenly acting like I'd caught the flu? I should've been over the moon, yet it felt like this was taking years off my life.

"I see why they fall asleep so fast!" she continued. "The warmth is comforting, isn't it?"

If I fell asleep right now, I'd either shrivel up or start bleeding out. Either way, I wouldn't wake again.

"Whnfnnngfgfff?"

"What was that?"

"Whnfnnngfgfff?"



“I don’t know how in the world you made that exact sound twice.”

I felt her laugh above me, though at what, I wasn’t sure. I was trying my best to ask her a question, but it wasn’t working.

Then I felt night engulfing me, starting at the backs of my ears, as if the sun were setting behind them. Belatedly, I realized I must’ve subconsciously cut off a few senses, since if I accepted all these stimuli indiscriminately, it was liable to break my brain.

“I guess the warmth really changes depending on whether you’re on top or...” She fell silent for a moment as it occurred to her what she was saying. “Ah.”

Then she wriggled—wriggled!—on top of me. I felt something bulge in the vicinity of my temples. Her hands grasped my shoulders as she leaned in for the kill, forcing my numbed senses to bounce back in self-defense.

“We’re really cuddled up right now, huh?” she whispered into my ear.

This was the finishing blow.

What happened to me after that is beyond my ability to describe in words. All I can say is this: It cracked me open like an egg.

And Shimamura

THOSE TWO WORDS were emblazoned on a sign standing to one side.

“What the heck?” I muttered unconsciously to myself, looking the sign up and down. At a glance, that almost sounded like a city name, but it seemed...incomplete. Did it have anything to do with *my* Shimamura?

Well, if I'm here looking at it, there's no way it doesn't, I thought.

Recovering from the embarrassment of my own cheesiness, I craned my neck and peered upward, contemplating how I might've gotten here. Unfortunately, it was as though my memories had been surgically removed. I was in the middle of town, wearing my uniform, but I couldn't recall where I was headed. School? Home? Work? I couldn't even remember the day of the week.

Since there was no point standing around, I decided to see what was up ahead—but the moment I stepped forward, the text on the sign suddenly changed to **ADACHI AND SHIMAMURA**, freezing me in my tracks. My eyes glued to the sign, I stepped backward, and...

“Oh. It changed back.”

Sure enough, it had reverted to **AND SHIMAMURA**. When I took another step forward, though, **ADACHI** swiftly returned. *Interesting.*

I turned my gaze to the road ahead, but couldn't see anything resembling the dull, unchanging scenery I'd grown accustomed to.

On one side, I saw a small, cramped train-station platform with small, cramped turnstiles. With handrails on either side, the sloped entry barely had room for both inbound and outbound commuters. I could only imagine the sheer hell of rush hour in a place like this. A small sign dangled from the roof, and to one side stood an old-fashioned telephone booth—the kind you rarely saw anymore.

If nothing else, I was certain I'd never been here before.

In the distance, I saw shadowy kiosks and swarms of people steadily moving away. Peering down the narrow path in front of me, however, I sensed a strange stillness. After a beat, I realized something was off—and no amount of rubbing my eyes seemed to improve it.

Inexplicably, the scenery was painted in monochrome.

The entire world appeared black and white.

Am I dreaming?

As I continued to explore, I had an even greater shock: There were Shimamuras everywhere.

Shimamuras across the street. Shimamuras riding bikes. Shimamuras at the vending machine, Shimamuras peering out the building windows. Every single person in this town was shaped like Shimamura. When a train pulled into the station, Shimamuras rushed out. In turn, I found myself hurrying backward in alarm.

What the hell is going on? Perplexed, I looked around. Though the Shimamuras were all in different outfits, they too were monochrome. *An entire town of nothing but Shimamura? Awesome. No, wait, that's weird.*

Dozens of Shimamuras passed me, each with a placid expression. As I observed them, it finally sank in that I seemed to be dreaming, but I couldn't remember when or where I'd fallen asleep.

This surely wasn't the afterlife, was it? I couldn't recall having lived long enough to get there, and there was simply no way I'd forget an entire life spent with Shimamura by my side. The waking world was bound to be on the other side of the sky above—I just needed to figure out how to get there.

Lifting one foot, I pressed it down onto the other, gradually increasing the pressure as I waited for it to hurt...but there was no sensation. Well, more accurately, the pain I felt was dulled to a haze. I gathered that I couldn't wake myself by force, no matter what I tried.

I started walking aimlessly through the town of Shimamuras. Now that I thought about it, I already had tunnel vision for her in the waking world, so maybe this was in fact an accurate reflection of how I saw things. It didn't really make sense in my head, but my heart felt otherwise.

Shimamuras on the left, Shimamuras on the right, Shimamuras right in front of me—*whoa!*

Another Shimamura stood before me. Like the others, she was colorless—but this one was looking straight into my eyes.

"Shimamura," I said.

In response, her lips moved, but produced no sound.

"I can't hear you," I told her.

She scratched her head for a moment, frowning, then reached into her bookbag and pulled out a notebook and pen. Flipping to a blank page, she scrawled something, then held it up for me to see: *How's this?*

"Th...that works."

Evidently she heard me just fine, since she laughed and started walking away from the station. Like a baby duck, I instinctively followed her. Oddly enough, as I trained my eyes on her back, the surrounding scenery seemed to melt away.

"Is this a dream?" I asked.

She wrote me another response: *Sure, if that's the word you use to describe a glimpse inside your heart.*

"This is my heart?" My second question was drowned out by a passing train departing from the empty station.

I like it when you come here, Adachi. It brings everyone to life.

I frowned, confused. Just then, we came upon the sign I'd spotted when I first arrived: ADACHI AND SHIMAMURA. NOW it made sense. Without me, it wasn't complete; it couldn't function as just AND SHIMAMURA. What would "and Shimamura" even *mean*, anyway?

Your heart's something else, huh? There's no one but me here!

"Yeah, I noticed," I muttered under my breath. I was grateful that this was just a lucid dream. If the real Shimamura said that to me, I'd probably have died. "Why is my heart black and white inside, though?"

Because it's incomplete.

"What do you mean?"

Think of this as a tomb you've built for yourself.

At the word "tomb," I furrowed my brow in concern.

Your physical body will only last so long, after all. This is your idea of the perfect afterlife.

Even without a clear explanation, my heart's teachings seeped through every inch of my body, all the way to my fingertips. *She's right*, I realized. More than some generic heaven, my soul yearned for a world with just Shimamura...and me.

You can see the ocean over there, by the way.

I turned to look in the direction she pointed, but all I saw was a monochrome sky and, on the horizon, the faintest trace of the sea.

We can't go farther than the beach right now, though.

"How come?"

Because you haven't gone any farther yet.

That made sense. I'd just have to cross the sea with her someday.

Gazing out at the sea of identical faces, Shimamura smiled wryly. *The residents here are all kind of interchangeable, since you've only seen me as a teenager.*

Indeed, I'd only known her a year now, and she hadn't changed that noticeably. Now I understood why all the Shimamuras looked the same—I'd need to flesh out my collection with a wider range of them. First high-school graduate Shimamura, then adult Shimamura... She would slowly age, as I would alongside her, until at last this place would be complete—a perfect world for me and Shimamura. Honestly, it was just like me to set my sights on something and spring to action.

Of course, I knew this Shimamura wasn't the *real* Shimamura. But when I spoke to her, thought of her, and touched her—she still *felt* like my Shimamura.

Shimamura had given me so much, and I wanted nothing more than to hoard it all right here in my heart. My desire to be with her was evidently gargantuan enough to surpass even the limits of my mortal lifespan. Perhaps it was, in a way, my entire reason for being.

Yes, this made sense as my afterlife—it would be a reward at the very end. And, even if I forgot all about this upon waking, the answer would be right there in each day I spent with her. That was how my heart was constructed, so I had nothing to fear.

One day in the far future, when I left the mortal world, I hoped to come back here—and I couldn't wait to see what it looked like when I returned.

Once we finished making our rounds through the town, Shimamura turned back to look at me silently. I promised I'd see her again, and moments later, I felt my consciousness rise into the light.

“It’s not like you to nod off.” A voice gently brushed my earlobe.

Peeling away the darkness, I raised my head.

“Good morning,” the soft, smiling voice said.

And so the light lifted its veil, the world ripened with color, and I was greeted by the very voice I’d yearned to hear more than any other.

A Small Stumbling Block

WHEN I SPENT THE NIGHT at Shimamura's house, I always turned into a square. Not literally, of course. But my shoulders and knees locked up, and anytime I sat down, I felt as stiff as a stale graham cracker.

I opened my bag restlessly, checking its contents for the umpteenth time. It was so packed with things I'd surely never need that my hand didn't even fit inside. My luggage overflowed, like my love. And, even though I knew I wouldn't offend Shimamura if I left some of it at home, I couldn't help feeling insecure.

I looked up at my shelf to check the digital clock. Our meetup was still an eternity away.

Rising to my feet, I paced a few laps around my room. Whenever I sat back down on the bed, trying to recline, I inevitably sprang up again. Thus, I decided I'd fall back on my usual strategy: leave early and kill time riding around town on my bike. There simply wasn't anything worth doing in this house.

Carrying my heavy backpack, I walked downstairs to the bathroom, where I checked my hair and makeup one last time. Before meeting Shimamura, I'd hardly used this mirror, but now that was part of my daily routine. Quickly adjusting my bangs, I headed for the front door.

As I passed the living room, I peered inside and felt my internal organs grow heavy. My mother sat on the sofa, staring down blankly at her cell phone.

"Hhh..." *Hey, Mom*, I wanted to say, but couldn't quite get it out.

She turned and squinted at me in much the same way I'd squinted into the mirror. "What is it?"

Like her expression, her voice was similar to mine—tense and cautious. With that much in common, understanding each other should've been so easy, yet we couldn't manage it for some reason.

"I'm...staying over somewhere tonight... So yeah."

Who was I kidding? The reason was obvious: in all likelihood, we both had a distaste for people who resembled us.

“Where?”

“At a...friend’s house.”

“I see.”

With a small nod, she promptly averted her eyes. The conversation was over. As for me, I was both relieved to be free of her and frustrated by my own awkwardness.

“A *friend*, hmm...?”

Her muttered words clung to my ears as I left the house. Was she surprised to hear that I had one? Skeptical, maybe? I wheeled out my bicycle and unlocked the chain. As I reflected on my relationship with my mother, my breaths quickened, and I felt warm sweat bead on the back of my neck. To shake it off, I hopped on my bicycle and started pedaling hard.

I didn’t hate her. But she reminded me of myself, so I *did* hate her. Contradictory though it sounded, I felt both sentiments fully. After all, I couldn’t stand the person I was...with almost no exceptions. When I looked at Shimamura—when I saw her smile up close—only then could I dredge up the slightest affection for myself.

To me, interacting with people was like stumbling over an uneven sidewalk: embarrassing and exasperating. I didn’t want to fall and hurt myself, but if I just stood there, I’d never reach Shimamura. She was too sleepy to come all the way to me. Thus, it fell to me to make the effort, so I decided that I would.

However many times I tripped and fell, I’d continue running until I found my way to her at last.

Let's Build a Castle

SHIMAMURA TYPICALLY SPENT the weekend turning to goo on the sofa. I enjoyed watching that immensely; it was really cute. On one such occasion, as I sat beside her and chuckled to myself, she raised a hand lazily in my direction. "Adachi, do you have any goals right now?"

"Goals?" I repeated.

"Like, at your job. Anything you're working toward?" The question might've sounded serious if it came from someone who *wasn't* flailing her limbs despondently. "I was thinking maybe that's what I need to motivate myself in my career."

"Um...I don't really think about that kind of stuff." At work, the only thing I thought about was Shimamura—no different from when we were together, really. It was a miracle I got any work done at all.

"Now that our trip overseas is behind us, it feels like we've checked everything off the list, you know?"

"True... Hmm..."

It occurred to me that I'd rarely seen Shimamura genuinely motivated to do anything. I generally pictured her shrugging with a smile. While I loved that about her, I knew better than anyone that she could contain multitudes. If she had a passionate side, I wouldn't miss that for the world. Perhaps *that* was my goal in life: to hunt down every last piece of the Shimamura puzzle.

"Okay... What if we start our own company?" I suggested offhandedly. After all, that seemed like the logical next step after we'd accumulated enough professional experience and personal savings.

Her sleepy eyes widened...and then she melted right off the sofa.

"That sounds kind of cool," she remarked from the floor. Considering her present pose, I was mildly surprised to hear that she was on board. "Our own company, huh?" Smiling, she propped herself up on her elbow.

Oh god, she's considering it? I was joking!

She glanced around the condo, then grinned, kicking her legs in

the air. “Our own little kingdom, just the two of us.”

“What?”

“We’d basically have our own country and our own castle! I think that sounds nice.”

A kingdom. A castle. A place for just us. Admittedly, I liked the thought of it too. “Yeah, it does.”

“All right, then! We’ll start our own company!” She raised her fists into the air. With her legs already bent at the knee, she looked like a curled shrimp. “Which of us will be CEO?”

“Oh, uh...you, I guess.”

“Then we’ll call it the Shimamura Company!”

“I think that’s already taken...”

This idea was a dream in every sense—silly, lofty, detached from reality. Still, trifling as it was, I took comfort in a cozy weekend chat like this.

Granted, was there any guarantee this would actually happen? Of course not. But that was kind of the point, after all.

How It Felt at the Start

IT ALL STARTED with a dream. The night I dreamed of kissing Shimamura, a new me was born. That was no exaggeration, either; with each passing day, I discovered that every single aspect of myself had been overwritten.

I'd developed mild jealous tendencies. An inclination toward brooding. A habit of introspection. Love and obsession. Pre-date insomnia.

I should really work on that last one. But that's not relevant.

I'd had that dream exactly once, and never again afterward—at least, as far as I remembered. Lately, I didn't really dream of much at all; perhaps my heart was too tuckered out from my daily emotional turmoil to have the energy for that at night. Every now and then, though, I thought back to that dream and wondered what it would be like.

Well... "like" in what way? I asked myself. Although it was my own question, I didn't have an answer and soon found myself flustered.

The thought of pressing my lips to hers made my skull pitch sideways, as if I were dodging an attack or trying to flee. If I'd been in my room, I'd probably have buried my face in my pillow and screamed.

Forcing my head upright once more, I stared at the far wall and zoned out. Shimamura and I were girlfriends, and...

"Heh heh..."

The thought made me chuckle to myself like a weirdo; I quickly cleared my throat to hide that. *Focus!* Steeling my heart, I laid the facts out before myself. She and I were in a relationship, and we loved each other, and we were girlfriends, so...wasn't a kiss within the realm of possibility? Did I dare hope for my dream to come true?

I was already beyond happy with how things stood, blessed with everything I could ever want, yet somehow I still yearned for more. Human greed truly knew no limits. I was ambivalent about almost everything else, but when it came to Shimamura, my thirst was unquenchable. It spawned countless new beginnings, and I had to run at

full speed just to keep up.

How was I supposed to ask her, anyway? *“Is it cool if I kiss you?”* *“May I please kiss you?”* My cheeks burned in protest.

When did most couples arrive at that conversation?

Probably whenever they both want to kiss, I reflected, pressing the tips of my index fingers together. *But does Shimamura ever want to?*

I vaguely remembered having a conversation with her along those lines—but only vaguely, since intense embarrassment had blocked much of it out. That was true of a lot of my memories of Shimamura. Lately, I’d started to wonder whether that might explain why I spent every day on edge.

I wish I weren’t such a mess.

At one point, I’d had my act together. But now, in the era of Shimamura, that was more or less ancient history. Still, if I kept running around like a chicken with its head cut off, I might *actually* lose my head, and it wouldn’t be a pretty sight. I needed to be mindful and put one foot in front of the other, step by step.

As for Shimamura, she was right in front of me.

We were at her house—no real plans, just hanging out. While part of me was delighted that that was becoming more routine, another part was slowly starting to panic.

In contrast to my excessive energy, Shimamura raised a hand to stifle a yawn, then wiped the resulting tear from the corner of her eye. Every second of it was adorable. After she was done, I made my move, pressing my hands to the table and leaning forward.

“Sh...Shimamura-san,” I stammered.

“Yees? What is it?” She looked up at me, her chin resting on her elbow.

“What are you smirking for...?” I asked.

“Oh, I’m hoping you’re about to say something *wei—witty* again.”

Something witty? Something witty... Nope, I’ve got nothing. “C-could I...”

“Hmm?”

“Could I...touch your lips?”

As I realized the room was spinning, I felt sweat trickle down from my scalp. Just holding myself together was taking everything I had.

“Hmmm...my lips? Sure, I guess.”

As much as I appreciated Shimamura’s general willingness to grant my requests, the thought of rejection made me sick to my stomach. To be clear, it wasn’t *her* that concerned me, but rather my own ineptitude. I had to admit, I *was* really weird at times.

“Top or bottom?”

“Uh...both?” Was it normal to kiss one lip at a time?

Shimamura scooted around the table toward me, and although this had been my idea to begin with, I bit back a scream of terror. There was no smile on her face as she leaned in, probably because I’d fallen short of her expected “wittiness.” I shrank back, afraid that one wrong move on my part would send my lips crashing into hers.

“Well, here I am. Go for it.”

“Okay...”

I pressed a trembling index finger against her lips, as if to silence her. She looked down at it in confusion. Granted, I wasn’t really sure what I was doing, but considering that I had next to no experience touching her lips, wasn’t this a good way of...you know...working up to a kiss?

Ironically, the first thing I felt was my *own* lips, suddenly burning hot. As the veins in my neck throbbed to life, I sat perfectly still, letting my finger absorb the sensation. Meanwhile, Shimamura still seemed puzzled. Yeah...truth be told, I wasn’t sure this was actually helping me. Maybe my action had been too cryptic to make sense.

I held out as long as possible, until my heart threatened to explode. At that point, I had to pull away—but the feel of her soft, plump lips lingered on my finger.

If we kissed, would I feel it again somewhere new?

I stared down at my finger for a moment. Then, without thinking, I ran it over my own lips.

“Huh?”

“Ack!”

The blood drained from my face as I realized what I’d just done—

right in front of her. As she fixed me with a wide-eyed stare, I felt that blood rush back to my cheeks. I was beginning to understand why she'd once compared me to a traffic light.

"Aha." Surprisingly, Shimamura broke eye contact first this time. "Are you perhaps hinting at something, Ada-cheechee?"

"Wh... No, no, no!" I shook my head vigorously, waving my hands in protest.

Her eyes followed the motions for a moment, and then she raised a hand in turn. "I'm going to ask you a follow-up question, and I want you to be completely honest."

"Okay..." For some reason, this felt eerily familiar.

"Do you want to kiss me?" Though her question was straightforward, her gaze was timid.



Why did she always put me on the spot like this? Well...probably because she knew it was the only way to actually have this kind of conversation. In that sense, she was trying to help me. And since she'd asked me a direct question, I wanted to give her a direct answer. I'd surely matured enough for that, right? Enough to trust our connection?

"Do I...? I don't know. But when I think about it, I get flustered and...want to cry."

As for *why* it brought on the waterworks, I honestly wasn't sure. Maybe because locking lips with Shimamura (albeit in a dream) was my origin story. It had triggered my rebirth... In other words, her mouth had shaped me.

Wow. That sounds like something out of a mythology textbook. Wait, am I being corny again?

"Hmmm... I see."

Her response sounded kind of judgmental to me, even if she hadn't meant it like that, and I shrank into myself reflexively. If I were a turtle, I'd probably have spent the rest of the night wailing inside my shell.

While I was busy picturing myself as an animal, though...

"Okay, then...um...have at it."

"Huh...?"

Her words had slammed straight into my temple; I could practically feel the pointy parts pierce my skull. When I reached up and touched the wound, though, it turned out to be an illusion. I somehow wasn't dead after all.

"Have at it?" I repeated like an idiot.

"I'm saying I don't mind," she explained patiently—but by the time it clicked in my brain, my throat had already closed up. "It sounds...potentially interesting, you know? Learning what it means to kiss someone. How it feels."

Though her tone was lighthearted, her cheeks told a different story. For once, *she* was blushing. The sight struck me with the intense realization of what was about to happen, and my heart began to pound so hard, my skull felt like it might burst open. The rest of my body seemed dull and sluggish, like a zombie's, but I nonetheless heaved

myself forward, leaning closer to her.

Are you sure? I asked silently.

“I’m sure,” I thought I heard her answer—but my delusional brain was probably just conjuring whatever I wanted to hear. As I shook my overloaded head, I somehow managed to bite my tongue, although I hadn’t spoken a word aloud. My focus quickly moved past the sharp pain and taste of copper, though. There were more pressing matters.

My hands latched onto Shimamura’s shoulders as if I was about to shake her senseless. She flinched hard, blinking back at me with concern. Then a reassuring smile slowly spread across her flushed face. The instant I saw that, something deep within me threatened to spill out. Stomach acid, maybe.

Trembling, I swallowed my excess saliva—and it really *did* taste like stomach acid. *Uh-oh*. That wasn’t part of the experience I wanted to share with Shimamura right now.

I could only imagine how pathetic I must’ve looked at that moment. Alas, there was no room for romance while I was fighting for my life. I felt like some part of my brain was spinning like a fan blade, jumbling my inner ear canals until I couldn’t even see straight. The closer Shimamura leaned in, the more flummoxed I got. At this rate, I was worried I might drop dead altogether.

Fine. But before I go...!

Panic traveled down my legs, tilting me farther than I had intended—and without a single moment spent easing in, I bridged the gap.

Hard.

I’d miscalculated my momentum, and we crashed together, flattening each other’s noses, our cheekbones trading greetings. The end result was less a kiss and more a direct attack that hurt my entire face.

Horror set in. *Oh god, I screwed up*.

When I felt her lashes brush my skin—*literally* right in front of my eyes—I nearly passed out.

With every other part of my face smushed against hers, it was frankly hard to tell whether my lips were even in the right spot. How was I supposed to retain my sanity while breathing her breaths? Focusing on my mouth, I turned my head...and inadvertently scraped

something hard. Someone screamed—probably me—and I recoiled.

Was...was that her teeth? Terror rose in my throat as I realized I'd trespassed inside her mouth, rendering any joy null and void. Judging from my intensely dry eyes, I'd forgotten to blink for a while.

Shimamura sat there with her eyes closed, rubbing her nose and chin. I wanted to apologize, to ask if she was okay, but I was too bewildered to speak. My mind was a muddled mess; I felt my brain creak as I gasped for breath.

Had that even counted as kissing?

If so, I was *shockingly* bad at it. It'd been more of a headbutt than anything. I could already tell that the memory of this moment would make me yearn for death.

But self-loathing would have to wait. Right now, I was still alive.

Shimamura's fingers wandered to her lips. Her eyes twinkled. "So...*that's* what your blood tastes like."

My blood—from when I'd bitten my tongue earlier. My brain was too overwhelmed to process the implication of what she'd said. Really, it was a miracle she hadn't spat it out.

"I didn't know it'd taste different from mine."

Throat twitching slightly, she licked her lips as if to ponder the flavor—and my heart swelled hard, as if someone had punched me in the solar plexus. Every breath was now sheer agony. This moment—her gesture, the sight of her—had hammered a dark, pointy stake into my skull...and what flowed from the wound was too inky to be blood.

"Well, I guess we've made it to first base now!" Shimamura laughed weakly, raising a halfhearted peace sign.

Absently, through hazy vision addled by the ringing in my ears, I watched my arm move on autopilot, tracing a shaky arc through the air to land on her shoulder. The moment I touched her, I realized my palm was burning hot—as though blood was pumping through my veins at breakneck speed, pooling in my face and fingertips.

I...

"I love you."

I love you!

Those three words were all that remained in my mouth; the

lingering feeling of Shimamura's lips had stolen all the rest. On some level, I understood that I'd just achieved my greatest dream, but that reality had yet to sink in fully.

Shimamura's face gradually flushed redder and redder as she smiled at me. Then something got into my eyes, and my vision blurred as if I were turning to goo.

After I'd melted away into nothingness, another me would take shape. Like before, Shimamura would kill me, then create me anew. But it was my blood—not my tears—that resonated with my fate.

A Kingdom for Two

“FIRST THINGS FIRST: the housework. Assign each task, or take turns?”

“Hmm...”

Gazing through the hole of the mostly untouched donut in front of me, I contemplated the question Shimamura had posed. Neither of us had a set workload, so some days were busy and some weren't. If we agreed to take turns, and a chore landed on one of us while her schedule was especially hectic, it seemed unlikely to get done at all.

“What if...whoever's less busy picks up the other's slack, or something?”

“Sounds like an advanced strategy.” She took a bite of her donut, smiling at its sweetness as she chewed.

In front of me was a notebook in which we tracked all the myriad decisions we needed to make, plus a colorful lamp, our drinks, and Shimamura's sweet smile—a peaceful scene, all in all. If my foremost desires manifested in reality, I suspected it'd probably look something like this.

Next to Shimamura was a to-go bag with treats to take home, as per usual. At times, that tendency felt like the biggest difference between the two of us. The only thing next to *me* was an origami crane that she'd folded and tossed my way.

We sat at a table inside the train-station donut shop, but if you asked me, this discussion was far sweeter than any dessert. After all, we'd reached the point in our lives (and relationship) when we needed to outline our future together. That was a very serious topic, to be sure, yet it made my heart soar at the same time.

Looking back, my teenage years—so full of joy and tears and panic and every other emotion at its most extreme—now felt like a distant dream. But the agony of those sleepless nights, accidental tongue bites, and similarly aching organs had surely paved my way this far...right?

Either way, we'd only just decided to move in together. There

were more tasks ahead of us than I could count on both hands. Moving was a major venture in terms of time and effort, and it was hard to imagine how I'd ever pack everything up.

"Once we've both got jobs, we can narrow down where to look for a place."

"Right."

With each decision we made, Shimamura wrote a new bullet point in the notebook. I wasn't sure we'd even *need* those notes, but at the very least, it felt important to put all our dreams on the table. It was fun too.

"We only need one bedroom, right?"

That caught me off guard. "Huh? Y-yeah, of course."

Come to think of it, once we moved in together, we'd share the same bed every night... If I hadn't been in public at that moment, the mental image would've had me writhing on the floor. On top of that, we'd soon share all life's more trivial aspects too. I was going to discover so much of Shimamura.

That filled me not with trepidation, but a swirl of excitement. To that day, I had yet to find anything I hadn't liked about her—truly, not a single thing. Shimamura was just so *beautiful*. She satisfied my heart's desire for perfection, because to me, she *was* perfect. That feeling of fulfillment superseded all else.

For as long as I could remember, I'd struggled to identify things I liked; I just never really grew attached to anything. Then Shimamura came along, and in the blink of an eye, she captivated me. Just like that, I had finally found something to love. And that moment in high school had quite possibly altered the course of my life forever.

"You going to eat that?" Her eyes drifted to the untouched French cruller in my hands.

Donuts were no exception to my indifference; while they tasted good, I never felt the need to seek them out. Maybe some part of me was broken inside. Regardless, Shimamura was kind enough to accept me just the way I was. Sometimes, when I stopped to think about that long enough, it brought me to tears.

Tentatively, I offered her the cruller. "Um...say 'ahhh'?"

"Awww, thank you!" Without the slightest hint of shyness, she

leaned forward and took a bite. She made it look so *easy* too. If I tried the same thing, I'd end up pulling my neck. "Isn't sugar just the greatest?"

"Uh...yeah."

She chewed with an expression of pure bliss on her face, then directed that same look of sheer sugary ecstasy at me, and I felt diabetes set in.

To me, living together would be about more than sharing a physical space—Shimamura would now be a permanent resident in my heart. She was everything to me, and in turn, I wanted to be more to her. I wanted to fill her lungs until she could barely *breathe* without me.

As long as she was by my side, I'd happily have journeyed to the ends of the Earth. On the other hand, I'd have nowhere to go without her, so if I lost her, I'd search for her. I would comb the very heavens—the farthest reaches of the universe—for however long it took until I found her again.

Of course, I had no intention of allowing that to happen in the first place, so I kept charging forward at full speed.

With Shimamura, I would start over again and again—a constant cycle of learning, growing, starting, and moving ahead. And of course, she would be at the center of all that. When it came down to it, there was nothing in life I valued aside from her. All the world's walls, ceilings, and floors were merely extensions of her being. Eventually I'd come to accept that I was incapable of living outside her framework, and since then, I could proudly say that I had unquestionably found true happiness.

"I wish this moment could last forever," I mused aloud.

Shimamura set down her pen, pausing briefly to examine the faint red imprint it left behind on her hand. "Yeah... I really relate to that."

We'd reached a stage where my wild howls of affection were no longer unanswered. The corners of my lips quivered. Everything I wanted to say—everything I wanted Shimamura to hear—flashed through my mind like a stream of light... Reaching out mentally, I caught each little mote on my palm, one at a time.

When I first told her I wanted to live together, Shimamura thought for a moment, then agreed with a grin: "Sure, that works."

Because of her, not even the most sleepless of nights could make me miserable; the memory of her kind words and soft smile comforted me.

A place—a castle—a *kingdom*, just for me and Shimamura. That was something I'd wanted since we were teenagers cooped up in the gym loft. In that sense, perhaps I would never truly change. Perhaps I was immutable. If so, I could only hope the same was true of my heart...because the crane we'd built from our dreams was preparing to take flight.



**And Then the
Age of Bronze**

$$A = B = C$$

WATCHING OUR LITTLE ALIEN freeloader's antics, I found myself reminded of Hougetsu when she was small.

But that would mean my eldest had been a young alien...and as her birth mother, that would make *me* an alien too!

This stunning revelation left me reeling. It sounded like something out of a top secret government dossier. When I mentioned it to my hubby, however...

"You've been an alien for as long as I've known you," he declared as he dried his face on a towel. With that, he walked out.

Hmmm. I paused and searched for any hidden philosophical meaning in his answer, but to no avail.

"Hey, wait, is that a compliment?"

He didn't even respond!

Dream of the Day

THE FIRST TIME I set eyes on my wife, she was walking amid bamboo trees, covered in so many leaves that I half-wondered whether she'd stuck them all to herself on purpose. As she later explained, she'd been exploring the forest surrounding an extravagant mansion belonging to a wealthy local family—to whom she had no relation whatsoever.

I still remembered the way she looked back then, dressed in her school uniform, grinning from ear to ear. She had the kind of charm that could lift your heart, and to this day, her smile remained every bit as bright.

Many years had passed since then, but we still lived together, joined by two daughters...and an alien. *Life works in strange ways*, I thought wistfully. One of those daughters would soon leave the nest for good.

“Hmm...”

“Huh? What’s got you down, my man?” Catching sight of me, my wife walked into the living room. Water dripped from her chin, suggesting that she’d just finished washing her face after me. “Need me to liven things up around here?”

“That’d be a great help,” I replied, although in most cases, *she* was the only person who really found her shenanigans entertaining.

She sat down beside me, resting her arm on my shoulder with a smirk. “Come on. Lay it on me. At this point, nothing would surprise me. Well, unless it’s worse than quitting your job to go be a woodcutter.”

“As far as I recall, I’ve never once managed to surprise you. I was just...reminiscing about when I proposed to you.”

“Oh.” She furrowed her brow. “A bittersweet memory, eh?”

Nodding absently, she looked away from me, her eyes darting all over the room.

Oh, you. As fearless as she might’ve seemed to anyone else, my wife was woefully out of her comfort zone when it came to serious

heart-to-heart conversations. In that sense, our eldest was the spitting image of her mother. My wife didn't seem to realize that, though; - instead, she insisted that Hougetsu took after me. Really, if anyone in this family was as laid-back as I was, it was our youngest.

"I know you're allergic to this sort of thing, so for your sake, I'll keep it brief."

"All righty."

"Back then, your response to 'Will you marry me?' was 'Sure, that works,' and... Well, to this day, I sometimes wonder what other options you were considering at the time."

Had her heart been drawn in more than one direction? Were there other paths in front of her? It was obviously far too late to turn back, but I still found myself reflecting on that.

She cocked her head nearly ninety degrees, like a cartoon character. "What nonsense are you babbling about now?"

"'Nonsense'? Sheesh!"

"Hold on a minute. I'll try to remember. Uhh...we were...at a fancy restaurant with a great view of the city lights, right? Did we order carpaccio?"

Her recollection of the moment was so utterly off base, it was actually appalling. "You know what? Forget it."

"Just give me a minute! Other options, other options... No, that was back in high school, so that probably wasn't it..."

Muttering to herself, my wife squinted at the far wall. *Yeah, there's no way she actually remembers.* She had enough trouble as it was just getting people's names. As aggressively friendly as she could be, she might not actually care too much.

After a full minute spent wrestling with the past, she grinned—and gave up. "Whatever dream I had back then belongs to the girl I used to be, not the woman I am now."

"That's a very theatrical way of saying 'Sorry, honey, I don't remember.'"

"Okay, okay. I'm soooooorry!"

"It's fine. Really." All that mattered was that, in the end, she'd chosen to marry me. "I was also thinking about Hougetsu."

“Hougetsu! Do tell!” She was all too eager to change the subject.

“Well...”

Our eldest was moving out...to go live with her girlfriend. The thought was dizzying: Our daughter was not only in a romantic relationship, but with another woman, no less. It had come as a shock to me at first. But when I saw how happy she looked, and how much more energy she had, I knew she must’ve found someone truly special.

Now, I knew a few things about this girlfriend of hers, but I’d never really spoken with her myself. And, as Hougetsu’s father, I felt I’d better not sit idly by.

“Shouldn’t we get to know this young lady? Or her parents? Am I overreacting?”

“Aha. So you’re dying for the deets on our future in-laws!” I’d never said that, but maybe my wife felt that the primary function of such milestone events was purely sating one’s curiosity. “I’m on it.”

The flash of her pearly whites suggested that she’d struck upon an amusing idea. She always wore that smile when she thought up a new dream for the day and decided to make it come true. Every time I saw it, I fell in love all over again.

In a blink, the conversation had progressed from our daughter moving out to our daughter getting married, and now we were arranging to meet her girlfriend’s family too.

“What type of carpaccio did we have that night, anyway?”

There was no carpaccio, dear!

Take Me with You When You Grow

I WASN'T EVEN HALFWAY through my slice of toast when Mom suddenly proposed, "Let's go to the aquarium!"

"Where did that come from?" Dad asked her.

"It sounds fun, doesn't it?" she answered with no further explanation.

Naturally, he gave up trying to understand her. "Yes, dear." Whenever the conversation went along those lines, you knew Mom had won.

"I just remembered how badly I wanted to go a few years back," she added.

"The aquarium, you say? Ah, of course," Yachi nodded sagely as she spread jelly across every inch of her toast.

"I bet you've never been to one, have you, Yachi?" I asked.

"An astute inference, Little." Her cheeks looked as soft and jiggly as the jelly. "Papa-san taught me that an aquarium is akin to an apartment complex for fish."

"Eh, more or less," Mom shrugged.

That was a funny way of putting it—as if the fish had to apply to move in. But I was woolgathering.

"So, anyone here got plans for tomorrow?" Mom asked.

Dad let out a defeated chuckle. "Not yet."

"Me neither," I chimed in.

"Hmmm," Yachi muttered pensively to herself.

Mom essentially ignored her, exclaiming, "Well, you do now!"

And so, just like that, she'd added a new activity to the calendar. It'd been some time since our last family outing, so I didn't mind. Plus, I liked fish—I wouldn't have kept one as a pet for so long if I didn't.

After washing the dishes, Mom walked into the living room and plopped down. She pulled out her phone and started scrolling, chin in hand.

“You can reserve tickets online these days? We’re living in the future!” She looked up and pointed at each of us in turn, counting. “Okay, two adults, two children...”

Then she froze, her finger hovering over the screen, and looked back at me.

“Right! Silly me, I forgot.” Reaching out, she tousled my hair, her eyes twinkling. “You’re all grown up now. Time flies, eh?”

Yes, I was now in high school. Dad’s hair was graying, Mom looked a little thinner, and my sister...

With a sigh, Mom averted her gaze. “*Three* full-price tickets, huh...?”

“Ugh. Could you not be such a cheapskate?”

She cackled gleefully without a shred of guilt, then grabbed Yachi by the collar and yanked her into her lap before she could sneak off to the kitchen. “As for *you*, missy, I’ll tell them you’re under ten. So don’t correct me, all right? Not that anyone but us would ever believe you!”

Yachi struggled to escape at first, but eventually gave up and sat quietly.

She claimed she was centuries old; the exact number changed every time we asked, but it was always six hundred and something. Personally, I didn’t think she was lying, and to be frank, I didn’t really care how old she was anyway. She hadn’t changed a bit since the day we first met (on the outside, at least). But I suspected she inspired a lot of changes in others—my family, in particular.

As we stepped out into the nearly full parking lot, the winter wind hurried us in its usual restless fashion, slapping at the gaps between our sleeves and our skin. When had I last visited an aquarium anyway? I dug to the bottom of my memories, but couldn’t recall even the slightest shred of such a visit. Was I really no different from Yachi? So much for playing a wise big sister.

With a self-deprecating smile, I took Yachi’s hand in mine. Today she was dressed like a sea otter. Unfortunately, that made other visitors

think she was part of an event. Soon, we couldn't walk two steps without people flagging us down for photos. Some didn't even ask first—rude much? Meanwhile, Mom smiled and posed as if she were a staff member. That didn't surprise me in the least.

"I thought this attire would help me blend in," the little otter murmured after yet another photo, staring down at her onesie. Wait, *that* was why she wore onesies all the time? But why had she expected a sea creature to "blend in" on dry land?

"To be fair, you look right at home in it." In a sense.

"Ho ho ho! I'm glad you're of the same mind."

She was so cute, it made me smile as we walked.

Following in Mom's shadow, we broke away from the flow of the crowd, passing through a special exhibit and enjoying the jellyfish before heading to a section called the Mermaid Sea—the aquarium's biggest tank, where the dugongs lived.



A faint green glow lit the room, as well as the water in the tank. There, dugongs swam quietly through the ersatz ocean, accompanied by schools of skinny fish.

“Oh *ho*. So this is the fabled dugong.”

“Correct.”

Yachi stared intently at the tank, watching the animals like a hawk. Something told me I would see her in a dugong onesie next.

“Wait. Where’s Mom?” A second earlier, she was just ahead of us, but now she was nowhere to be seen.

“She ran into the gift shop to buy Hougetsu something. We just got here, though... You’d think she would realize that we’ll have to lug it around the whole time,” Dad sighed.

“Hunh.”

“The woman has no patience, I tell you.” He seemed amused by the situation, if a little exasperated.

“My guess is that she is buying otter cookies or dugong crackers,” Yachi declared with a smug chuckle, as if she was some kind of genius detective. I chuckled too, trying to imagine what the souvenir might be.

In the past, there’d been five people in our house—me, Mom, Dad, Yachi, and Hougetsu, each of us a support beam keeping the roof overhead. We spent so many happy years together, I’d just sort of assumed it would always be like that. But that “always” was over now.

You know, time had a funny way of *feeling* like forever, while in actuality, it was robbing you blind. I couldn’t say I was a fan.

My sister had her own place now, and she only came to see us a few times a year, so she wasn’t automatically included in these sorts of family events anymore. When I stopped to think about that, it made me want to scream. By hoisting Yachi in my arms, though, I could hold myself together a little longer.

“Huh? Is something the matter?” Yachi kicked her dangling legs, the aquarium light tinting her hair green.

Everything could change. Even something as foundational as family could disappear in an instant, and there was nothing you could do about it. One day, the aquarium and dugongs and whole world would cease to exist, just like the “always” I’d thought I had.

Yet even with dark shadows cast across her face, Yachi was still the same.

“I’m sure you’ve got a long life ahead of you,” I began, “but...”

Maybe she could take my “always” with her, wherever her eternal journey led—if it had a destination at all.

“You’ll always remember us, won’t you, Yachi?”

Remember me, my mom, my dad, and my sister. Remember the life we once lived.

“Of course I shall.” She turned to face me, her blue-tinged lips curling into a smile. “Rest assured I am everywhere, everyone, and everything.”

As she spoke, entire galaxies expanded and contracted in her pupils—swirls of purple and black scattered with tiny white stars. They said that the eyes spoke louder than the mouth; if so, hers could recount the laws of the universe and the far, far future. So even if I didn’t entirely understand what she’d said, I knew she was probably right.

“Oh, good. That’s a relief.”

“Indeed.”

With that, Yachi spun back to face the tank. As the dugongs twirled their tails and reveled in their allotted ocean, we simply stood there together and enjoyed the show.

Imaginary, Symbolic, Real with the Opening of the Third Eye

\$\$\$#\$#\$#\$\$#\$##\$###\$\$\$\$\$\$\$#####\$

Matching language setting to
environment. Calibrating... Complete. Processor activated. Testing
functionality of ocular facsimiles... Success. All external facilities
operating as expected. Reading oxygen level and density. Location
traced. Calibrating signal transmission. Movement range defined.
Automatic revision enabled. Calculating air temperature and humidity.
Calibrating hair texture accordingly. Homogenizing body density. Air
resistance enabled. Connecting with metadimension... Success.
Connection stable. Locating all humans. Mama-san: Gym. Papa-san:
Work. Little: School.

“Hm? Is that Shimamura-san?”

Transversal wavelength detected. Calculating distance and speed of interception. Overwriting system commands... Success. Standby. Standby. Standby. Standby. Standby. Standby. Standby. Standby. Standby. Standby. Hungry. Standby. Standby. Standby. Arrival detected. Greeting deployed.

“Welcome hooome.”

"Thanks. Have you been watching the house for us today?"

“I most certainly have.”

“Judging from the pillow marks on your face, I’ll bet you were actually watching the backs of your eyelids... Rhino today, huh?”

Contact with head facsimile detected. Squishing horn.

“Huh? It looks like you brought something home with you.”

“Why yes, I did. Can you guess what?”

Change in wavelength detected. Framework analysis unsuccessful. Exception raised. Deferred. Redirecting scan to paper bag. Analyzing components: Sodium. Potassium. Magnesium. Phosphorus. Iron. Zinc. Copper. Manganese. Iodine. Selenium. Chromium. Molybdenum.

Retinol. Folic acid. Pantothenic acid. Biotin. Carbohydrates. Amino acids.

Answer: donuts.

“Yay!”

Yay.

Yay. Yay. Yay.

Yaa



**What Came
Next**

Chapter 4: What Came Next

AT SOME POINT, my life had become a single recurring question:

Why is this happening?

The thought dangled from my shoulder, like my purse. My toes tingled in protest as I hopped off the bicycle, then watched it glide smoothly into the space beside the garage.

Alas, that despicable woman returned so fast, I half-wondered if she'd hit the wall and bounced back. She spun her keyring on her finger, jingling it like a bell, and I heaved my umpteenth sigh of the day. Again, I found myself wondering *Why?*

"Come on in!" She sidestepped into the entryway of her house, then turned back to face me, as if we hadn't just ridden here together.

"Thank you for the lovely invitation," I responded dryly.

"What can I get started for ya?"

"Just let me in, please."

"Would you like fries with that?"

"Never mind. Goodbye." I turned to leave.

However, she grabbed me by the shoulder. "Come on. At least place your order before you go."

"Could you drop the bit already?!"

Considering that she'd pedaled all the way to my house and back, I'd have expected her to be out of breath. Instead, the ghoulish burst out laughing.

Ah, I remember now.

It was a late winter day, around the time the spring buds had just begun to peek out from hibernation—roughly the time when my

daughter was set to leave the nest. For some reason, she and I were invited to spend the night at the Shimamura family home...together.

A sleepover? With my daughter? *Why?* Nothing about it made any sense to me.

Admittedly, I could simply have hung up the phone, and it was frankly a mystery to me why I didn't do just that. What was it about that woman's overwhelming energy and control of the conversation that steered me to agree? Honestly, I couldn't remember—she talked so fast, I could never get a word in edgewise. I only recalled accepting the proposition...but that seemed stranger still. Was I going senile?

I mulled that over as I sat on the sofa, one knee bent. My daughter had left the house earlier that morning, but I intended to take my time. My plan was to eat dinner at home, arrive around nine at night, walk straight into the Shimamuras' guest bedroom and go to sleep, then leave early the next morning. That way, I'd fulfill the bare minimum requirements of this "sleepover."

Anyone would've told me just to say no from the outset. Well, I *had* said no! Several times! But the goblin cajoled me into it somehow! Perhaps she was actually more dangerous than I'd given her credit for. She even had the audacity to hound me over the phone for not showing up earlier.

"Adachi-chan just arrived. Get over here, Ouka."

"A beautiful name, but I'm afraid it isn't mine."

"It isn't? Uhhh...Hana-chan!"

I hung up on her, and since I knew she'd almost certainly call right back, I turned my phone off. Setting it down, I let out a long breath.

When I asked her before why she was pestering me, she responded, "We're friends, aren't we?" At the time, I had no answer to that. Now, as I sat with my chin in my hand, I contemplated whether it was true. I had considered a number of people my friends in the past, but I could no longer recall the metrics I'd used to judge such things—and besides, I couldn't begin to evaluate this woman if I didn't even *know* her.

Anyway, some time passed, and...

Ding-dong!

That wasn't part of my story.

I already knew who was at the door—I felt it in my gut. My eyes darted in time with my breaths, as if they were trying to escape. If I didn't answer, I knew she'd just keep ringing, so I reluctantly headed to the door and opened it.

“Hey there!”

Her voice threatened to echo across half the neighborhood. Faced with her excess energy, I fell silent.

“Before you get mad, I *did* remember your real name on the way here. But ‘Hana-chan’ isn't half bad either, y'know?”

Her smile and cheerfulness were truly baffling. What part of this was fun for her? “You...”

“Yes?”

“Are so unbelievably stupid.”

“Ha ha!”

As I grew older, I'd only ever felt an invisible weight grow steadily heavier on my shoulders, pinning me down. Perhaps there was a valuable lesson to be learned from her explosive dynamism.

By someone *else*, of course. Certainly not me.

It might've been my first time riding double on a bicycle. Personally, I found it a little stressful not to be in direct control of a moving vehicle. I'd also have liked the driver to pipe down.

“Fine, then...” I continued outside the house. “I'll order the yellowtail.”

“Oh, I'm so sorry! We just ran out of sushi for the night.”

“Will you let me inside before I strangle you?!”

“Death threats over sushi? Really?”

This isn't about the sushi, damn you!

Everything about this was just such a massive waste of time. Yet when I looked at her, I could tell there were people who enjoyed

wasting it. As for me, I found that so exhausting that it drove me to needless aggression.

“Anyway, not to be a broken record, but come on in,” she repeated, dropping her keyring into a basket hanging over the shoe rack.

“...Thank you for having me,” I replied perfunctorily.

“You like sushi, huh?”

“Not really.”

As I took my shoes off, I found myself examining the other pairs lined up. Which were Sakura’s? I couldn’t recall buying new shoes for her since her first day of junior high.

“Well, hurry up and get in here, my friends!”

“Oh, shut up...” *Friends? Plural?*

With a final glance at my discarded shoes, which were surrounded by a sea of strangers, I followed in the babblers’ wake. At one point I tried—somewhat diffidently—to greet the others in the house, but I doubted they even heard me over the woman’s ceaseless screeching.

I couldn’t recall the last time I’d walked down someone else’s hallway. What in the world did my daughter do here all day long?

“Guest room’s on the second floor. You don’t mind sharing with Adachi-chan, do you?”

“What?!”

“It’s the first door at the top of the stairs.”

She gave me a little push on the shoulder to send me off. When we stood side by side, I realized she was slightly shorter than me; if we’d met as teenagers, I would’ve assumed she was an underclassman. Come to think of it, how old was she, anyway? Not that I’d ever concerned myself with other people’s ages.

“You...!” What was she thinking, putting me in the same room as my daughter? I looked over at her in protest.

She simply shook her head. “Nope. I have no idea what you’re getting at with that glare of yours.”

“Liar!”

“Tell me like a grown-up. I’m all ears!” She’d basically shut me

down with no hesitation, as though she wasn't aware of the concept of discretion.

I felt words bubble at the back of my parched throat, but when I opened my mouth to speak, I sensed that something tore. Alarmed, I withdrew a breath, making myself cough—and I realized that, if I voiced those bubbling words, I might never forgive myself.

Meanwhile, the woman's narrowed eyes twinkled like jade crescents. "I'm clueless over here!"

"Just forget it."

I couldn't tell whether she actually had a brain or not. All I knew was that she inspired nothing short of sheer frustration in me. In fact, this was the first time my dislike of someone had ever been so decidedly straightforward. No nebulous gray area, no ups or downs—just a single pure feeling, stretching on for eternity.

"You sure?"

"Go to hell, you dumbass!"

"Watch your language, potty mouth."

My fury fueled me up the stairs as I cursed my own stupidity for coming here. But when I glanced back, expecting to see her sneering up at me, I realized she'd disappeared. That pissed me off too. I was so angry, my vocabulary had turned as sharp as a blade; with nowhere to direct my fury, my only option was to take deep breaths until it melted away. Once my heart was calm and cold once more, I exhaled. In hindsight, it all seemed utterly inane.

How long had it been since I'd last walked into a room I knew my daughter was in? Even in the comfort of our own home, we rarely shared the same space.

"Ugh." Clapping a hand to my forehead, I cursed myself again.

As I reached for the doorknob, a small sound inside the room made me freeze. Reassuring myself that this was indeed the first door at the top of the stairs, I spurred my cowering body forward, stiffening my heart to match my limbs.

Inside, the room was small and slightly dusty. Scanning it, I saw Sakura sitting in the corner with her overnight bag. She made eye contact, then promptly dropped her gaze to the floor.

“...Hi.”

We’d left our own house separately, only to reunite in someone else’s—it felt so backward. When I sat down a short distance from her, my skin started to crawl; as an excuse to look away, I set my bag down and pretended to fish for something inside it. Before long, my daughter rose and scurried from the room.

Smart, I thought. Except in a workplace, no one was ever obliged to be around someone who made them uncomfortable—even if it was their own mother. In Sakura’s case, I could only wonder which was stronger: her desire to live with someone else, or her desire to escape living with me.

Then I heard a door open farther down the hall. When I looked up, I spotted a child walking toward the stairs, wearing onesie pajamas themed after some sort of brown, blue-tailed bird. Her little wings were spread wide, but she showed no sign of taking flight. Given her bright-blue hair, however, I wasn’t sure she was related to anyone here.

“Hello there!” she greeted cheerfully as she passed.

“Hello,” I replied with a nod.

A question still practically dangled in front of my eyes. Was this girl friends with the family’s younger daughter...? Surely she wasn’t the younger daughter herself. That woman’s weirdness was relegated to internal traits only.

“What kind of bird are you...?” I found myself asking aloud. I always had liked birds—more than I liked people, if I had to try to measure.

At that, the girl came toddling back, peering into the room. “I am a red-flanked bluetail.”

“Ah. I see.” She looked more like a penguin to me—probably because of the way she waddled.

She dashed off, screeching down the stairs. How was she connected to this family? Curious, I peered down into the hall. There, another girl—probably the younger daughter this time—snatched up the little bird, tucked her under her arm, and carried her off somewhere.

“The poor thing’s been poached,” I murmured.

Very little, it seemed, was normal about this place.

To me, the Shimamura household was a box of mysteries.

With nowhere to go and nothing to do, I was reading manga on my phone to pass the time when I heard footsteps coming up the stairs. They most likely weren't my daughter's, and they sounded too heavy to be a child's, so I had a good idea of whose they probably were. As I stared at the wall and ignored the intrusion, though, the presence approached me without any restraint. Since I'd already learned that ignoring her only made things worse, I reluctantly turned to look.

Smiling, the woman held out a plate of sliced apples in my direction. "Want some?"

A small gap on the plate indicated that someone had already helped themselves.

"Well, since you're offering... Sure."

I set down my phone and took a slice, feeling its crisp chill against my fingertips. When I bit down, its mild sweetness flowed across my tongue, its juice reviving my mouth. I hadn't even realized I was thirsty. Now my breaths felt a little lighter.

"All by yourself, huh? I bet Adachi-chan ran away from you."

"Trust me, it was a merciful gesture." I was sure she was a kind girl at heart.

"Yeah, I know. She's down there snuggling with my daughter."

"*Snuggling?*"

Truth be told, the nature of the girls' relationship wasn't really a surprise to me. I had thoughts about it, of course, but I felt it wasn't a mother's place to comment. On the other hand, since I'd failed as a parent in every *other* respect, another part of me felt it was a bit pointless to start pretending now.

Sakura was seeing someone. Romantically.

...Eventually, I couldn't really taste the apple anymore. "I'm full."

"No prob!" Yet there she remained, sitting by my side.

"I'm finished now, thank you."

“Was it yummy?”

“Right. I forgot you don’t take hints. Get *out*.”

“Being in someone else’s house makes you *real* uncomfortable, huh?”

In a sense, her ability to go selectively deaf was truly masterful. She changed the subject nimbly without the slightest acknowledgment of the other person’s input. She was clearly used to disregarding people, and I suspected I could never hope to replicate that.

“I’d say most people feel that way.”

“Ha ha ha! You sound just like Adachi-chan!” She clapped me on the shoulder, seemingly delighted. Then, as if she sensed that I was about to snap at her, she rose to her feet and cut me off. “Want to come downstairs and have a cup of coffee?” she offered, munching on the last apple slice.

“Can’t you tell I’m busy right now?”

“Okay, then. I’ll bring the coffee to you.”

“Fine...I’ll come downstairs. Happy?”

Evidently, the only say I had in this was our location... And for lack of a better way to put it, the more I caved to this woman, the easier she was to tolerate. I wasn’t sure why I’d chosen to spend all this time with her in the first place. Nevertheless, I set my phone down—not that anyone was trying to contact me anyway—and followed her downstairs. Contrary to my expectations, however, she turned and headed along the first-floor hallway.

“Isn’t the kitchen *that* way?”

“Just come with me.” She beckoned me over.

I followed her down the hall, frowning dubiously, until at last we reached the door at the end. There, she grasped the handle...and *sloooowly*, silently cracked the door open.

“What are you doing?”

“Spying,” she whispered, pressing her eye to the tiny gap. To her credit, at least she was honest. She glanced back over her shoulder. “Don’t worry. It’s safe to look.”

“What does *that* mean...?”

She stepped out of the way. The longer we stood there, the more apparent it became that we weren't going anywhere else until I looked for myself. Against my better judgment, I took her place and quietly leaned against the gap in the door. Inside the room, I saw my daughter between her daughter's legs.

I realized belatedly that that description was unfortunate on my part.

They were sitting on the floor and chatting idly. Sakura rested against the other girl smiling contentedly, as if she'd found true peace. I had never seen her so *happy* before—in fact, she looked like a different person entirely. What happened to the girl whose scowl mirrored my own? The girls' joy bloomed before my eyes as if they were two wildflowers in a field of color.

I hadn't taught my daughter to smile that way. Unbeknownst to me, she'd learned to do it all on her own, and just for this girl she so clearly loved. Yes, I practically saw passion flow from their fingertips and burn holes in the floor.

Then again, I'd never experienced that sort of happiness myself, so I couldn't be entirely sure. Perhaps those guesses were all just a patchwork quilt of my own imaginings.

When I moved away from the door, the woman reached over and carefully shut it once more. Our children had seemed too engrossed in each other to notice us, but in my opinion, that was for the best. Otherwise, this would've felt an awful lot like trampling on someone else's garden.

I looked into the woman's eyes, silently asking her, *Why would you show me this?*

She only grinned. "You said you'd never seen her smile, so...there it is."

"...I see." My voice came out hard, as if there were rocks in my mouth. I stalked back down the hall.

She waltzed up beside me, peering at my face for my reaction, all the while smirking as if she'd done me a service.

Ugh. "No need to trouble yourself on my account."

She elbowed me jovially in the arm. "Trouble? Psssh. What are friends for?"

“Go to hell,” I sighed before I could stop myself.

“Don’t want to.”

“Forget it.”

When I tried to escape, she seized my arm in a vice grip and dragged me off to the kitchen. I expected it to be crowded with other family members, but it was fortunately (?) deserted. Empty chairs surrounded the table. Two didn’t match, and had clearly been brought in as last-minute additions—a perfect metaphor for the two outsiders currently visiting.

“Have a seat wherever you like.”

“Certainly. Which chair is farthest from yours?”

Grinning wordlessly, she sat down in the chair closest to the refrigerator. Seeing that, I chose the one at the opposite end of the table. When I sat down, though, she got up and moved to the chair next to me. I’d seen that coming, of course, so I headed to her original seat across the table. Again, she followed me over. Even when I could predict her next move, I couldn’t *prevent* it.

“I may as well ask—is this fun for you?”

“Not really.”

Then knock it off! “I’ll let you win. Just go sit across from me.”

“Fine, fine. But only because I won.”

The woman didn’t make any damned sense, and being forced to compromise with her infuriated me. Once she’d returned to her original seat near the fridge, I sat back down opposite her. Ruminating on how pointless that little game had been, I waited for her to start chasing me around the table again, but she didn’t.

“Well?”

“What?”

“I was promised a cup of coffee.”

“Oh, right.”

Did she think we’d only come in here to play the world’s most boring game of musical chairs? Knowing her, probably.

She walked over and fetched a mug from near the sink; she’d evidently poured the coffee in advance. When she offered it to me, I

took it, expecting it to be hot to the touch. Instead, cold condensation met my fingers.

“Iced coffee? In winter?”

“Why not? It’s warm in here.”

“...True. Could I get some milk for this?”

“Sure. One sec.”

She set a carton in front of me with a thud. Feeling the chill of its contents against my palm, I watched her pour a copper-brown liquid into a plastic cup featuring Doraemon and Dragon.

“What’re you having? Barley tea?”

“Coffee’s great and all, but at home, this is my go-to.”

She dropped in a single ice cube, then raised the cup to eye level, as if to admire the contrast of the colors. I couldn’t quite explain it—perhaps it had something to do with her general air of restless exuberance—but the plain, unsophisticated tea seemed at home in her hands.

“That’s very...you.”

“Is that a compliment?”

Ignoring her, I poured a little milk into my mug. When I handed the carton back, she for some reason took a swig before returning it to the fridge.

“Rattle, rattle, rattle, rattle...!”

“You’re even louder than that ice cube.”

“Damn right! No hunk of ice is going to beat me.”

“Whatever you say, lady. Good luck with that.”

My coffee tasted perfectly fine, though in truth I was never very particular about food or drinks.

When Sakura was little, I would ask her what she wanted for dinner, but she just frowned. It quickly became apparent that, try as she might, she simply never had an answer. Each time I saw the panic in her eyes, I felt panicked in turn. She was never great at answering that kind of question—and I was like that myself, so I didn’t bother waiting. Therefore, I still had no idea what she actually liked.

Looking back, that more or less applied to every single memory

we shared.

Then it hit me: I'd now finally discovered something Sakura was passionate about. It was too late for that to *matter*, of course—too late for it to connect us—but at the very least, I'd learned something.

"Well...?" I asked.

"What?" She stopped swirling her ice cube and looked up at me, puzzled.

"Didn't you want to have a discussion or something?"

"What would *I* possibly need to discuss?"

That...was a difficult question. A woman like her would sooner have led me into pointless tangents of idle conversation that together spanned the circumference of the globe.

"If you just want me to fill the silence, I can humor you for a minute," she added.

"Just for a minute, hm?"

She swallowed my sarcasm with her barley tea. "What to talk about...? Well, my hubby—actually, that can wait."

"Your husband? What about him?"

"You have sharp ears, huh?"

I watched her tuck her hair behind her ear, then squeeze its lobe idly with her thumb and forefinger. I'd never given anyone's ears much thought, but for some reason, her action drew me in.

"Perhaps. That would explain why I find your voice so grating."

"Okay, then. Let's have ourselves a real pointless conversation," she suggested. The girlish grin on her face suggested she wasn't bored in the least. In that moment, she actually looked almost...*pretty* for a change. "Remember when we were at the gym the other day, and I chased you around, pretending to be an angry goose? Why did you kick me, Hana-chan?"

"How could you ask that when *you* kicked me first?"

As she'd promised, this conversation was indeed pointless. Furthermore, I got the sense that she was trying to make "Hana-chan" my official nickname, and I was staunchly opposed to that. No one had ever called me that in all my life; for the most part, my friends called

me Acchan.

Of course, this imbecile wouldn't think to ask about that first. For that matter, we weren't really friends. Or were we? *Hmm...no*. But what was she to me, then?

As I mulled that over, she blathered on and on without waiting for any response, as usual. If I let her, she would talk herself hoarse. At this point, I had to wonder why I was necessary for this "conversation" at all. But if I pointed out that I wasn't needed, she'd decide it was my turn, then sit and stare at me at point-blank range until I said something. Thus, I was fine keeping quiet about it. Her chatter streamed like rain, and I just stared vacantly as I soaked it in with no umbrella.

When I looked down to sip my coffee, I caught sight of the red-flanked bluetail creeping into the kitchen, flapping her wings with each sneaky step as she tiptoed toward the refrigerator. The other woman had noticed too, but was seemingly pretending otherwise. Then—right as the little bird passed behind her—she whipped around, grabbed the scruff of its neck, and tossed it back out.

"Gyaaah!" Tracing an oddly graceful arc through the air, the child landed on her feet and bolted down the hall.

"What was *that* about?"

"Huh? Oh, just a little game we play."

I watched the bluetail run away with her hands in the air, shrieking "Wheeeee!" Admittedly, she *did* seem to be having fun. "You must be good with children."

"Duh! I'm a kid at heart myself!"

"I won't argue with that." At the very least, she seemed more comfortable with them than I ever was.

As if on cue, another set of footsteps approached, though this time their owner didn't try to be sneaky; it was the woman's husband.

He took one look at me and froze like a deer in headlights. "Oh... pardon me."

I had yet to say hello to him tonight, so I inclined my head in greeting.

He bowed back deeply. "Glad to have you here." Then he paced back and forth near the cupboard for a moment. "Don't mind me. You

two have fun.” With that, he walked right out again.

“God, he can be so weird sometimes...”

“That’s an insult coming from *you*.”

The woman squinted up at the cupboard. “Aha.” She nodded in understanding. “I’ll let it slide for tonight.”

“Let what slide?”

“Let’s just say my hubby’s a real *snack*. Get it? Nya ha ha!”

She truly couldn’t care less about my questions. To be perfectly frank, she was rude and obnoxious and generally the exact sort of person I couldn’t stand. Yet here I was, sharing a drink with her. I knew that the next time we encountered each other at the gym, we’d probably chat again. My feelings were at odds with reality. So what caused that? Did she somehow possess the power to bypass my heart?

Once I had finished my coffee, I found myself scrutinizing this childish woman—this *gremlin*. I couldn’t think of any other way to describe her.

“Well, I should excuse myself too.”

“Awww, come on!”

“Thank you for the drink.” Before she could drag me into something else, I rose to my feet and hurried away.

“I hope you’re looking forward to dinner!”

“Yeah, yeah...”

For a moment I glanced back at her, wondering whether I ought to help cook—but her grin pissed me off, so I changed my mind and turned back. Her smile always seemed so genuine, so *radiant*, and if I had to, I’d guess that made it hard for me to take.

Out in the hall, I found her husband standing around, staring up at something.

“Hm?”

“Heh heh heh! I saw that, Papa-san.”

Suddenly, the little bluetail dropped down to the floor in front of him. To my eyes, it looked like she’d fallen through the ceiling, but that surely couldn’t be right.

“You snuck the treats out behind Mama-san’s back, didn’t you?”

Smugly, she pointed a wing straight at the man's face.

Defeated, he unclenched his fist to reveal a bag of junk food. That must've been what he retrieved from the cupboard. But how could the girl have seen it?

"I'll let you have half if you promise not to tell," he offered.

"Yay!" The bird raised her wings in joy. "Fret not. My lips are zipped."

"Hmmm..."

As he pinched her cheeks, they seemed as stretchy as rubber. Hardly reassuring. He slid his hands under her arms, hoisted her up, and carried her off into the living room. She flapped her wings in sheer delight—so exuberantly that I half-expected her to leave a trail of feathers behind.

"Bribery..."

Down here on the first floor, every room seemed noisy. That was a stark contrast from my own house, which remained deathly quiet even when its occupants were home. Then again, I sometimes heard my daughter's muffled shrieks from upstairs. That had started happening when she was in high school...probably after she met that girl.

It was funny how other people had the power to change you. For example, ever since I'd met this woman, I'd gotten noticeably angrier. And more exhausted. But for better or worse, my relationship with her would never lead to any *major* changes, probably because I was a grown woman. As years passed, life's experiences hardened you until there was no pliability left.

How grown-up was Sakura now?

As I listened to each sound in turn, I heard laughter from the room at the end of the hall. I didn't need to peek in there to know it was my daughter's. Still, I couldn't have imagined the look on her face if I hadn't come here tonight.

"I see now."

Fleeing from the warmth, I climbed the stairs and breathed in the wintry air, my lungs cold with equal measures of understanding and self-loathing. At last, I was alone once more in the second-floor guest room...and the relief I felt made me sick.

Unlike other people, I didn't associate the setting sun with fear for the time I'd wasted. On the contrary, it was a relief that the day would soon be over. As the evening sky blazed through the window, I was at peace. No one bothered me—not that woman, not my daughter, not even the little bluetail.

“Dinnertiiime!”

On second thought, scratch that last part. The child ran full speed past the guest bedroom's open door. The ensuing loud *thud* suggested that she'd hit the wall before bouncing back to peer in at me.

“It is dinnertime! Let us be off!”

“O-okay...”

At her insistence, I rose to my feet, hesitation heavy in my knees. As she hurried off ahead of me, I watched her bird hood bobble energetically from side to side and half-wondered if she was leading me into a dreamscape.

Then she turned back to look at me. “You greatly resemble Adachi-san.”

Unconsciously, I touched my cheek, surprised that a child with no prior knowledge of our familial relationship still recognized it. “You think so?”

“Yes. Particularly in your wavelengths.”

“Our what...?”

Chasing a strange little bird, I found my way down the staircase and into the light. It sounded rather like something out of a fairy tale framed like that. I watched the bird saunter into the brightly lit kitchen, then reluctantly followed suit.

Inside, everyone else was already sitting at the table. Sakura sat closest to the entryway, and when we made eye contact... Frankly, it was hard to say which of us was in a bigger hurry to break it. Still, the room was so bright that my gaze shifted restlessly. As was true when I'd found myself at the Shimamura family's kitchen table earlier, the space felt unbearably cramped with the addition of two outsiders. It simply

couldn't accommodate us—in more ways than one.

As usual, my daughter had chosen the farthest chair. Beside her sat the woman's older daughter, then the younger, then the bluetail, in that order. Sakura now wore her usual blank expression, directed down at the table before her; gone was the smile I'd glimpsed earlier. Evidently, the stranger I'd spied on didn't reveal herself in public.

Well then, it's hardly my fault for not having seen her, I lied to myself.

Meanwhile, the aroma of sauteed onions wafted up from the plates in front of us.

"At times like these, nothing beats curry and rice for dinner."

"Why is that?"

"Because I love curry."

So...there's no correlation, in other words. "Somehow, that doesn't surprise me."

"Hey, what does *that* mean?!"

Ignoring her, I looked for the sole remaining empty chair.

Then she grabbed me by the arm. "You can sit next to me!"

"Excuse me?"

"Right here!" She patted the chair beside her—the one positioned directly across from my daughter. "Smoking or non-smoking?"

"There's a smoking section here?"

"You're such a goody-goody. I'll bet you've never smoked in your life."

She forced me into the chair, and I came face to face with our daughters. Mine looked deeply uncomfortable, while hers wore a sheepish grin. The girl turned and whispered something to Sakura, whose lips curled faintly. When I saw how it eased her anxiety simply to avert her focus from me, I knew our relationship was too far gone to salvage.

Everything about this was so completely awkward—that woman, my daughter, the small talk, all of it. If I'd been given the choice to die on the spot, I might well have taken it.

"Heh heh heh! For this occasion, I have lent my aid," the little

bird announced.

“Oh yeah? Right on. What’d you do?”

“Tonight, I peeled the shells from the hard-boiled eggs!”

“Wow.”

Smirking, the bluetail crooked her fingers in a peeling motion, her cheeks smooth and glossy enough to put those eggs to shame. In response, the older daughter smiled softly. She had seemed so juvenile when I first met her, but now her countenance resembled an adult’s. Given her age, perhaps she was simply growing up.

Then I realized...there were no eggs on the table. Was I missing something? If nothing else, I expected they’d be diced up in the salad at the table’s center, but I couldn’t spot any in the bowl. Frankly, judging from the look on that woman’s face, she’d probably eaten them all while she cooked.

“Whatcha looking at? You think I’m pretty?”

“Pretty *ugly*.”

“Whatever you say,” she shrugged.

In truth, I’d snapped back purely on reflex and didn’t have any real issue with her looks. I usually didn’t even pay attention to other people’s faces, yet...I found my eyes lingering on hers. No, she wasn’t actually ugly. But correcting myself would only inflate her ego, so I kept my mouth shut.

“Come on, folks, let’s dig in!”

At her prompting, everyone picked up their spoons—even the bluetail, using her fuzzy fabric wings in place of her hands. *How does that work?*

“You know, there’s something special about us all eating in the same room. Doesn’t it just feel like we’re in high school all over again?”

“I didn’t even know you in high school.” I looked around for someone to humor her in my place, but everyone else started eating while conspicuously avoiding eye contact.

Was this family used to ignoring her while she rambled? If so, perhaps I was a fool to pay her any mind at all... Alas, she kept trying to talk to me regardless, and I didn’t have the mental fortitude to keep quiet the entire time. It was easier to respond with whatever came to

mind.

“Man, I miss high school,” she continued. “I still remember the dream I had back then...”

“Oh?”

“I wanted to be a Pokémon trainer.”

My interest had been merely a polite gesture, and just like that, she’d slashed it to shreds. “...I see.”

“Alas, I mostly couldn’t make it happen.”

“*Mostly*?” So she *had*, but only somewhat?

“What was your dream, Hana-chan?”

“To avoid having anyone call me Hana-chan.” If only I’d tried harder, maybe I could’ve made it come true.

“Nya ha ha!” She jabbed me in the shoulder.

As I wallowed in despair, I took a tentative bite of the curry. When was the last time I’d eaten someone else’s cooking? Its flavor was quite ordinary, unlike the woman who prepared it. “This is surprisingly mild.”

“Well, a certain someone likes it that way...”

“Talking about yourself in the third person?”

“I never said it was me! But yeah.”

When she burst out laughing, I felt my emotions come and go as if I were watching the ocean tide. Except the tide wouldn’t have a face or voice.

“I also enjoy Mama-san’s curry very much!”

“Yeah, well, you eat for free, so you don’t get to complain either way.”

In contrast with her sarcasm, her tone was as gentle as the hand that stroked the little bird’s head. It would almost have been a heartwarming scene if it didn’t involve a red-flanked bluetail spooning curry into her mouth.

“Feeding the wildlife...” I muttered.

It felt like this conversation was taking place in a cage at the zoo. I glanced over at the two girls across the table. Even when she was

talking to the woman's daughter, Sakura hid her smile, as if saving it for a special occasion. She looked as uncomfortable as I was... For some reason, our familial resemblance always seemed strongest in our negative qualities.

My daughter never smiled in public. That sakura tree only bloomed for one person, and I would never see it with my own two eyes for as long as I lived. Like the curry, that was something I'd simply have to swallow.

After dinner, the older daughter picked up the chipper little bird and set her onto her shoulders; then the two left the room. At no point had I seen that little bird actually use those wings of hers.

"What's her deal, anyway?" I muttered to myself.

"Who among us is truly capable of explaining what their deal is?" came the reply I didn't ask for, an overly familiar hand suddenly resting on my shoulder. "Do you know *yourself* well enough to answer that question?"

"I know *your* deal is that you're obnoxious," I said aloud, feeling no particular need to keep the retort to myself, though I knew it wouldn't mitigate any of the aforementioned obnoxiousness.

"Youuu and meee... Whooo are weee? And what could that raised fist's meaning beee?!"

"Stop singing or die."

"You're so mean! What'd I ever do?!"

What haven't you done?

Shrugging me off, the imbecile returned to the kitchen. I had noticed that her hand and sleeve were wet, so she was probably in the middle of washing the dishes. I stood there for a moment, then followed her.

"Do you need help?" I offered, to be polite.

"Mmm...nah, that's okay. I'm almost done here. You should go spend some quality time with Adachi-chan."

“Hah. Good one.”

“Come on, what kind of weirdo can’t play nice with her own daughter?”

“...*You’re* the weirdo here.”

“No, you.”

“No, *you*.”

“No, you!”

“No, *you*!”

“Stop copying me!”

Every now and then, on exceptionally rare occasions, this woman made a painfully good point. In truth, I sometimes felt that I was never meant to be a mother. Nevertheless, the reality was that I had a child... and I wasn’t strong enough to wipe the slate clean with her.

Fleeing the kitchen, I walked down the hall and past the bathroom, trying to think of a place where I could hide away. That was when I saw it: the red-flanked bluetail’s shed skin lying discarded on the floor.

Hmm.

Curious, I crouched and touched it; it was surprisingly soft, as if made of real feathers. Now I understood why these people all petted her constantly. The rest was still a mystery, however. From what I’d seen at dinner, not just her hair but her *teeth* glowed blue.

Evidently, this onesie’s owner was currently in the tub with that woman’s daughter. I heard her gleeful little voice echo off the tile, as vibrant as the light she exuded.

I take it Sakura’s girlfriend doesn’t bathe with her, then. Well, of course she wouldn’t...or would she? The harder I thought about my daughter having a girlfriend, the more my skull creaked in protest. What was their relationship even like?

I imagined that the glimpse of them I’d gotten earlier answered that question. Still, I couldn’t comprehend how it *felt*. Sure, I’d been married at one point, but while my husband was seemingly in love with me, I couldn’t recall ever feeling the same. From my perspective, it had all just sort of happened—so, naturally, it all fell apart. Then again, “fell apart” implied that we’d built anything together in the first place.

Regardless, my daughter and I made a nest in the wreckage...and now she was preparing to take wing.

“A happy ending...”

I walked down the hall aimlessly, my gaze fixed dead ahead, until I arrived at the living room. When I peered inside, I spotted Sakura sitting with her knees bent, her expression unguarded, speaking to someone. It was that weirdo’s husband—although, to his credit, he didn’t seem like a weirdo himself.

When she saw me enter the room, she bowed deeply to him, then got to her feet and hurried out. I didn’t speak up or try to stop her; I just watched her go. Left standing there with the woman’s husband, I turned back to him after a moment. “I didn’t mean to interrupt,” I offered, to be polite.

“Oh, that’s all right. I said everything I needed to.”

From his voice and body language, I sensed that he was a mild man—a stark contrast from his wife, but then again, opposites often did attract. In fact, perhaps that sort of relationship stood to benefit from a full set of complementary traits.

“Did you need to speak with my daughter?” I couldn’t pretend that didn’t come as a bit of a surprise. “What about?”

“Mmm...well, just normal things, I think. I told her I hope she’ll have a happy, fun life together with my Hougetsu. I mean, there’s not much more a father really *can* say, is there?”

“Guess not...”

He gestured for me to have a seat, and I did so, since it would’ve been awkward to refuse. An uncomfortable silence lingered—albeit different from the type I was used to with Sakura.

“For what it’s worth, since these are our kids and all, I figured we ought to get to know each other a little bit. Thank you for coming.” With a sheepish grin, he bowed to me.

“Thank you for having me,” I replied automatically, bowing back on reflex. Internally, however, I was a little confused.

“As you know, our daughters are getting a condo together.”

“Yes, I’m aware.”

“The road ahead of them is long, full of twists and turns and

potholes. But as long as they work together—”

“Sorry, what?”

The man sounded like a teacher at a school assembly; he seemed to realize that too, because he stopped short and cleared his throat. He evidently wasn’t particularly well-spoken—unlike his wife, who’d been gifted with altogether too much gab.

“My point is, if they’ve decided to live together, I don’t see any reason for us to stop them.”

“Right.”

“They deserve a happy relationship, just like their parents do.”

“They do,” I replied. I didn’t have the heart to tell him I was divorced, but it wasn’t important. A happy relationship *was* undoubtedly what was best for our children.

Silence descended between us again, broken by his forced laughter. “Anyway...I think that’s all I really wanted to say.”

“Okay.”

On the one hand, I didn’t see the point of telling *me* all that, but on the other hand, it did sort of make sense. If I figured he was essentially asking permission for our lives to weave together. Of course, that wasn’t my decision to make.

“Well, I’ll be going now!” With that, he sprang up and practically fled from the room.

I wasn’t planning to stick around, you know, I thought as I watched him leave. Now all that remained was the blathering of the television and a gust of cold air in his wake. It was suddenly starting to feel like the night before a wedding—but perhaps that had been intended all along. It would explain why that woman had dragged me over here to begin with.

“Good grief.”

Knowing her, she’d done it not out of any sense of obligation, but purely because the idea sounded fun. She was a total enigma, yet somehow extremely predictable at the same time. Talking to her made me feel like I was attempting to communicate with an alien life-form.

Debating whether to retreat upstairs for the night, I turned off the abandoned television and let out a breath. Then, as my eyes wandered,

I spotted a tall stack of animal onesies sitting folded in the corner of the room—that eerie child’s other clothes, presumably. There were so many different colors and styles, she could practically have started her own zoo.

“The zoo...”

I lifted an elephant onesie from the pile and thought back to the past.

Once upon a time, the Adachi family had gone to the zoo together. I couldn’t remember whose idea it was—either mine or my husband’s. It certainly wasn’t Sakura’s; even as a small child, she never asked us for much. Looking at the animals, her reactions were so muted, it was hard to tell whether she cared about them at all. Truly her mother’s daughter.

The only time I’d caught a glimpse of emotion from her was when we browsed the gift shop. She’d seemed interested in an elephant plush toy—but she didn’t ask me to buy it for her, so I didn’t. To this day, it was the one moment I would never let myself forget. Perhaps it was what marked the end of our short-lived mother-daughter connection.

Sensing someone approaching, I looked toward the door, where my next visitor awaited. This time it was the woman’s older daughter, fresh out of the tub. She seemed like she was looking for someone—Sakura, most likely.

“Oh, hi,” she greeted me casually as she glanced both ways along the hall.

Just as she walked away, I finally struck upon what I needed to say: “Look after my daughter, please.”

At first, she didn’t reply—possibly because my own response had been so delayed. But I didn’t need her to answer. In my mind, I was merely passing the torch, so perhaps it would in fact have been easier if she didn’t.

But she did.

“Look, um...I’m not doing this to be her caretaker,” she explained, leaning back around the doorframe to poke her head inside the room. As I gazed back up at her, eyes wide in surprise, she continued, “I’m doing this because I want to be with her.”

Her mouth was half-open, her dangling lower lip wet with

emotion. Looking back, I got the feeling this girl only ever stood before me to shield Sakura.

Meeting her straightforward gaze, I wondered how I could answer her. Her words had knocked all thought from my skull. I was still sitting, and the hardwood floor no longer felt cold against my palm by the time something finally rose to mind.

“She’s all yours.”

“...Thanks.”

With my cheap blessing in hand, she withdrew, her footsteps audibly shifting into a run halfway down the hall. She must’ve felt so compelled to say that to me... The thought made me laugh out loud. Was it that surge of youthful passion that lightened the weight on my shoulders a bit? “The kids are okay, it seems.”

That was when *she* walked in. “Who, me? Aw, I’m not *that* much younger than you!” she declared, once again offering an unneeded response to my musing. “Or am I? Remind me, Hana-chan, how old are you again?”

“I’ll tell you if you stop calling me that.”

“Ah! So you’re two years younger than me!”

Instead of trying to reach a compromise, she’d pivoted to reading my mind. Worse, I had the nasty feeling that she was right on the money.

As she sat down across from me, I noticed that she held a glass of something in one hand and a canned beer in the other. “Can I interest you in a beer? I got it as a gift a while back, but no one in our family ever drinks the stuff.”

“...Sure.”

I rarely drank alcohol of my own volition; most days, water was enough to satiate my body and spirit alike. But if this trespasser was going to drain me dry, perhaps a little extra hydration wouldn’t go amiss.

I cracked the beer open and took a curious sip, filling my mouth with a bitter flavor I’d almost forgotten. It spread to every parched corner of my body, and when I sat up straight, I almost heard it sloshing around inside me.

“Hang tight—it’s not quite your turn to take a bath yet.”

“That’s fine.”

“Look—it’s like I’m having a beer too! Doesn’t my barley tea look basically the same?” She swirled her glass, rattling the ice inside.

“You really love to change the subject, don’t you?”

“I’m just saying whatever comes to mind. You’re getting it straight from the source!” She cackled, as if *she* was the one drinking alcohol. Frankly, I was already getting a hangover from this overdose on her personality.

“Looking at you makes me think of a burglar.”

In English, she demanded, “Whaaat?!”

What...am I talking about? Ugh. Shut up. “Well, it’s common sense to lock your door at night. But if a burglar wants to get into your house, they’ll bust their way in regardless. So, in a sense, there’s no point locking your door at all.”

“Ah, yeah. Scary thought.” She nodded, folding her arms. “Wait. What’re we talking about?”

“Breaking and entering.”

“Could you make it sound a little more whimsical?”

“Banditry, then.”

“Perfect.”

I hated that I was getting a sense of what she wanted from me. Not only had she waltzed into my heart uninvited, she’d practically set up camp in my backyard. By this point, she might have even started a fire.



The beer was already almost lukewarm, but I took another sip, hoping the buzz would somehow blanket my queasy feeling.

“I had a word with your daughter just now. She told me she’s doing this because she wants to be with Sakura.”

“Yeah, so? You going to play the ‘over my dead body’ card? Let’s hear it!”

Ignoring her jokes, I continued to speak my mind. “This may sound harsh, but...I’m surprised anyone *wants* to live with my daughter.”

As her mother, perhaps it was wrong of me, but I’d felt that from the moment Sakura informed me that she was moving out. Furthermore, I was shocked that she returned the sentiment, considering the extent to which she took after me. I had passively gotten married—passively started a family—but now, I actively chose solitude.

“Heeey! How could you say that, you little stinker? Hmm?!” She poked me in the side. Despite being fully sober, she was acting far more drunk than I was.

“It’s just that...she must have lots of good points, that’s all,” I said.

If only I knew what they were. What a horrible mother I turned out to be. The Sakura I knew had inherited all my worst traits. Only now did I realize that I must’ve started avoiding her for the same reason one might hesitate to look in a mirror.

“You should be proud.”

No one on Earth was guaranteed a place to belong. Some spent their whole lives searching fruitlessly. But now that I knew my daughter had found hers, I could be sure of one thing: she wouldn’t need me in her life. In fact, she never had.

“What about you? Do you want grandchildren and all that?” I asked.

“Eh, I could go either way. If they come along, I’ll spoil ’em rotten, and if they don’t, then they don’t. We’re not owed these things—they’re gifts. Everyone in my life is a gift.”

“Hm...” Sometimes she said something so completely reasonable that it threw me for a loop.

“The way I see it, all living beings have an instinctive drive to leave something of themselves behind. But suppose one day we meet an immortal alien or something. So long as we live on in her memory, it’ll surely fulfill that need, right?” Gazing up at the ceiling, she chuckled to herself, as if thinking of someone specific. “So, yeah, I’m perfectly content with what I’ve got now.”

“...Maybe it really is just that simple. Minus the nonsense about aliens.”

“Ha ha ha!”

“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, don’t worry. You’ll understand someday.”

“God, I hate you.” The longer I talked to her, the heavier my shoulders felt. In short, it wasn’t worth the effort.

“The legend of tonight’s curry shall be passed on for years and years to come...” she added.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Yet...sometimes her words whisked me up into the stars. Addled by the alcohol, I found myself uncharacteristically chatty. “You know...”

“What is it? Tell me, tell me.”

“Whenever I talk to people, it reminds me of how much I dislike human beings.”

“Oh. That’s depressing.”

“It’s so much work to constantly read the room and...manage all their feelings.”

“Wait, you do all that? Every time? Wow.” Her lips formed a perfect circle that matched her widened eyes. Social etiquette probably sounded like rocket science to somebody who never stopped to consider anyone but herself. “If you put yourself first more often, maybe you’d actually start to like yourself.”

“...Maybe.” If only I had a friend whose feelings I never needed to manage—why, yes, that *would* be much easier. So how come the prospect made me so uncomfortable?

“Did you get a chance to speak with my hubby? He wanted to talk to you.”

“Yes. He was acting like our kids are getting married.”

“I mean, it *is* a serious commitment.”

“...I suppose.” How had I felt during my *own* wedding? This woman was so loud and obnoxious, I couldn’t remember.

“I gotta say, you look damn good holding a beer.”

“What? Oh...you think so?”

Frankly, she looked rather elegant herself, the way she swirled the tea in her glass.

“Lemme see that real quick.” She took the beer can from my hand and raised it to eye level. “Two grown adults, sharing a drink on a quiet night... Hoo! They could write a book about this.”

“Where is this ‘quiet night’ you speak of?”

“Very...picturesque, some might say.”

“And where’s the other ‘grown adult’?”

“Since you insist, I guess I’ll try a sip.”

“You don’t mean *you*, do you?”

Ignoring all my retorts, she took a swig of the beer.

“I thought you said you don’t drink.”

“Hmm?” She furrowed her brow.

Instantly, I was overcome with gripping dread. I should simply have run from the room, but the alcohol dulled my judgment.

“Whoa.” Once she swallowed that sip, she lowered the can and tilted her head to the side. “Hmmm.”

“What is it?”

“Ish really...”

“What?”

Then she rubbed her stomach. “Eeugh...”

“Oh no.”

I could think of a hundred different ways to yell at her, but they all swam around inside my head, trapped by my vertigo. Sweat beaded on my skin as my heart throbbed in fear, loosening the screws of reality until I floated in space. In contrast to my bodily senses, my mind felt distant, as if it were trying to make a break for it.

Light erupted in my vision.

Then the rushing stream reached me.

Murky and brown, like the earth.

Washing away all the ephemeral feelings that had begun to sprout that night.

Making me regret ever coming here.

That is to say...she puked directly into my face.

“I said I’m sorry!”

“I’m not mad at you. Just go away.”

“You totally are!”

“In case you haven’t noticed, I’m in bed now.” Did she need me to patiently explain that I couldn’t sleep with her screeching?

After washing my face three times in the sink, then scrubbing my entire body in the tub, I finally felt clean again. By the time I climbed out, the anger that bubbled up in me had drained away. But now that she had finished showering herself, she refused to leave my side, apologizing profusely. Unfortunately for her, the sincerity of said apologies was greatly diminished by the jokes she’d seen fit to couch them in.

“I’ll make it up to you tomorrow, okay? Promise!”

“Yay. I’m so excited.”

It seemed a patient explanation was indeed necessary. With a sigh, I opened my eyes to see her smiling sheepishly at me, twiddling her thumbs. Evidently, she *did* have some small sense of shame, at the very least.

“Hey, girl...um...you look great in those pajamas!”

“Thank you for the shallow compliment. How are you feeling? That single sip you took seemed to make you extremely ill, extremely quickly.”

“Eh, honestly, I feel like I got it all out of my system.”

"I see." A waste of my concern, then. I tried to shoo her away, but she started pacing around the room. At that point, I couldn't be bothered anymore. *Die for all I care.*

"Today was really fun, though."

"What?" I narrowed my eyes. She had to be doing this on purpose, and I didn't want to take the bait.

"What? I'm just saying I had a good time."

"Yes, well, your idea of a good time is usually my idea of a nightmare."

"*Usually?* So you do have fun with me every now and then?"

"...Are you invincible or something?"

This wasn't about optimism versus pessimism. She had a way of charging straight forward at top speed that terrified me. I'd never before met someone with so much passion for life.

"I don't have fun with you, but...it's nice to hate with all my heart for a change." I had nearly forgotten what it felt like to embrace my emotions.

"That doesn't sound very nice at all!"

"It's the middle of the night. Could you please stop shouting?"

"Is that why you always tell me to go to hell?"

"Have you considered that perhaps I say it because your actions warrant it?"

She laughed, shoulders shaking, though I couldn't see what was so funny. Then, finally, she turned away from me. I knew better than to let my guard down, so I continued to watch her like a hawk. Naturally, the times when I was most prepared for her antics were always the times she didn't try anything. Perhaps that was the one situation in which she actually succeeded in taking a damned hint.

"Sleep tight!"

"...Good night."

She turned off the lights as she left the room, which made me feel like a small child all over again. When was the last time anyone had shown me that small kindness? I lived a life of silence, and now I was drowning in a veritable ocean of her words.

What an awful ending to an absurdly awful day.

Shivering from the residual chill of my still-damp hair, I stared up at one corner of the ceiling, waiting for my eyes to adapt to the darkness. Even then, I couldn't shake her obnoxious voice from my head. It was probably seared into my brain after all that talking she'd done. Then, as I grimaced to myself, I heard the door open slowly and fearfully.

"Are you asleep?" Sakura asked in a small voice.

After a moment of hesitation, I decided to answer. "No. I just got settled."

Even in the dark, I sensed her alarm and hesitation. Nothing warm or fuzzy ever came of our interactions, as if they took place in a perpetual winter, and I was frozen stiff. Maybe that was only to be expected, seeing as I had never tried to plant any seeds.

Silently, she crawled into bed next to me for the first time in... How long *had* it been? By the time she was in grade school, she'd already learned to sleep in her own bed. I had given her her own room under the pretense of granting her independence, but in reality, I was the one who'd wanted to be free. Now the gulf between us could never be bridged—but just for tonight, we would close our eyes in the same room.

I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that this would never happen again. She would be moving out soon, and once she was gone, I had a feeling she'd never come back. But we no longer had any reason to live together, so it was the right thing to do for both of our sakes. The thought was a tiny bit sad—but, at the same time, knowing that it would soon be over made it a little easier.

"Sakura."

I didn't bother waiting for her to respond. This wasn't a two-way conversation. It was my last chance—my final wish.

"You're a lot like me," I continued.

Poor thing. You never asked to have all my flaws.

"So I just want to say..."

Despite myself, I summoned every last ounce of maternal spirit I had.

“Please don’t turn out like I did.”

That was everything I wanted to impress upon her as her parent. I wished for her to find happiness in her new home, for her love to stay strong, and for her partner to love her just as much in return. I wished for her to succeed in every aspect where I had failed.

For a moment there was no sound, as if we both forgot to breathe. My lips felt dry and chapped. One by one, every last sensation dropped away until I felt like I was floating in space. Then, after enough time passed that I’d come to terms with my fate...she spoke.

“Okay.”



Was that the answer I had hoped for, or would I have been happier in silence?

Though I was just lying there, I suddenly felt as though I'd run a marathon, and the breath I had been holding rushed out in a long sigh. Normally I slept curled up in the darkness, but tonight, I felt strangely comforted by the light. There was nothing to fear now—my daughter would surely find happiness without me.

“...Ugh...”

Just as my consciousness started to sink against the pillow, I caught a residual whiff of that woman's puke and realized I was still angry. Thinking of exactly how I'd tear her to shreds in the morning, I squeezed my eyes shut and drifted off into the dark.

From the Creators

Story

Hitoma Iruma

For a year now, I've been going to the local gym every day to swim in the pool. I swim about a kilometer each time, so over the past year, that's at least 300 kilometers total. Should I keep doing this? Sure, why not? Okay!

Illustration

raemz

An American from the state of California.



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